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THE MAGAZINE OF
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NOVELLA

UH-OH CITY 111 **Jonathan Carroll**

SHORT STORIES

THE COMPANY OF STORMS 7 **Kathe Koja**
SHATTERED TEMPLATE 27 **Mark W. Tiedemann**
MIRACLE IN A SMALL VILLAGE 42 **Bonita Kale**
BIRTH DAY 50 **Robert Reed**
MAGRITTE'S KICK 62 **Richard Cornell**
INFINITY SYRUP 79 **Laurel Winter**
THE TWELVE SWANS 87 **Lois Tilton**

DEPARTMENTS

BOOKS 15 **Algis Budrys**
BOOKS TO LOOK FOR 21 **Orson Scott Card**
SCIENCE: Outer Cyberspace 102 **Bruce Sterling**
INDEX TO VOLUME 82 160

CARTOONS: HENRY MARTIN (14), JOSEPH FARRIS (41), MARK HEATH (101)
COVER BY THOMAS CANTY FOR "THE TWELVE SWANS"

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

A MONTH AGO, the little girl down the road lost her cat.

She came trudging up to my house twice a week, walking a half mile on a steep gravel road, to see if I had seen the cat. Since we're her nearest neighbors, and we collect stray cats like some people collect baseball cards, we were a likely hiding place for the missing animal.

During that time, she and I struck up a friendship. She is only about nine or so, and in awe of the cats in my house. I am considerably older and in awe of her horse. We have a lot to talk about.

I gave her a copy of my first novel, which she was happy to have, and promptly forgot about it. Until two weeks later, when she told me that her mother had read the book and enjoyed it very much.

Her mother. I suddenly regretted my impulsive gift. I had given a little girl a book that has some profanity, more than its share of violence, and one rather explicit sex scene. What would her mother think? Would she forbid the little girl her biweekly walk up the hill?

Then I caught myself. I had given the book with no qualms to the little girl. The qualms came because I feared *adult* reprisals. I figured the little girl would pass over the parts she didn't understand or, better, ask someone about them. But I feared that a parent would censor not just the book, but all contact with me, the person who wrote the book and had the audacity to give it to a child. I had my arguments prepared: I had read books like that as a child, and they hadn't done me any harm; better let a child read what she wants than protect her from it; and if it's too old for her, she won't read it because it won't interest her.

I waited, but the battle never came.

So I wondered what caused the fear in me. And I thought of two recent incidents that are probably

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the tip of a very large iceberg.

A local grade school teacher, a casual acquaintance of mine, refuses to let her own children read books, watch television, or see movies with fantastic content. She believes that children must understand the real world, not hide behind the make-believe.

Later that same week, I spoke to my sister, who teaches college English in Minnesota. She was complaining about the difficulties she has teaching any form of fantastic literature in class. The students, she told me, require a great deal of preparation before they accept anything outside their own perceptions of the world.

Forgive me while I shudder.

I believe these three incidents are related. I think the grade school teacher's attitude is becoming the norm in this country. I think my sister is seeing a tangible result of that attitude — that young adults rebel against anything fantastical. I also think my own reaction to discovering that a parent had read a book I had given to a child reflects on that same norm.

The attitude frightens me. The fantastic has existed from the moment human beings told the first story. Each culture has its myths and folktales, and those stories have a strong element of the fantastic. Storytelling serves a purpose: it gives us the tools with which to cope with our society, with our lives and with our fears. Realistic fiction has its place — and its place is alongside fantastic fiction. Only by accepting both the realistic and fantastic can we feed the rational and emotional sides of our personalities.

For to deny the fantastic is to deny the imagination. The great scientists, the great teachers, the great healers all rely upon their imaginations as well as upon their knowledge. Perhaps when we deny children the fantastic, we deny them the best road to their own future.

I suspect I'll be loaning the little girl down the way more books. We don't see each other as often now —about once a week instead of twice — as she trudges up the hill or I stumble down. We lost our excuse to visit.

You see, she found her cat. It had been hiding in one small corner of the shed, sneaking out at night to eat the cat food its young mistress had been leaving for it. Apparently the family's new dog, a big mutt with very strong opinions about the way the world works, had chased the cat into the shed, and the cat had been too frightened to emerge.

Imagine that.

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Kathe Koja's unusual writing style and her hard-bitten plots have made her one of the hottest new writers in the field. Dell just published her second novel, Bad Brains. *She last appeared in F&SF a year ago, with the haunting "Angels in Love." "The Company of Storms" is a very different story. Both subtle and fierce, "The Company of Storms" is one of Koja's finest.*

The Company of Storms

By Kathe Koja

LIKE FALLING INTO the sky, the lake was so smooth with stars; only the faintest tickle of surf, the most minimal sigh. Northward the private beach, long pale playground for the expensive summer homes that stood above, designer concoction colored like false driftwood. Here, below the two-by-four boardwalk, built last summer, decaying creosote tang and already-begun splintering against the fringe of beach grass pruned dry and wicked at the ankles, the slender slope of iron-dusted sand, its damp black powder swirled to strange confectionary patterns in the greater width of ivory-brown: this was public land. Pop cans and beer bottles, remnants of cheap fireworks, the sticky skin of used condoms, the mysterious shape of half a toy: a half-submerged tide of detritus grown from the cheap seeds of an afternoon's entertainment, abruptly thinning as it passed the makeshift sign onto private land, as if the sand itself respected

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the artificial division of wealth.

Past midnight, almost one, in a darkness still lush with heat. A heavy red sign advised that the beach closed at 10:00 P.M. But the water is always there.

In the parking lot, softly grinding over gravel, a big dark-blue Chevy pickup with a heavy-duty winch. Its lights were off. Behind it a Dodge van, its color the combination of road dirt and burnished bondo, back doors roped shut with a messy length of heavy coated wire. The pickup rode a careful half-circle around the edge of the boardwalk, onto the beach itself, the tread of its passing a crude mosaic in the sand. The van stayed where it was, motor idling, from its interior the bass-heavy distortion of a cheap stereo turned too loud. The side panel door slewed open, faint descending tinkle of empty cans. Somebody said, "Shit," and then, "Help me pick these up."

No one answered. Four people began walking toward the beach and the pickup — now turning in slow pirouette to face the water — finishing off the last of their beer. Seventeen, eighteen, no older, elaborately shushing each other like noisy kids pretending to be quiet in class. The one left behind turned off the van's engine, making the silence seem larger than it was.

"Whose turn is it?" said one of the girls: louder than the rest, brassy, with the kind of top-heavy allure that sours early. In one sloppy swallow, she drank off her beer, let the can fall. Her question brought shrugs, the desultory small talk of disagreement. The boy in the van had finished picking up the beer cans and was now walking toward the group. The wind seemed to rise a little. The boy who had driven the pickup, a tall boy with shabby cutoffs and stork legs, said, "I went last time."

"Then it's your turn," the loud girl said to the boy nearest her, blond and heavy-shouldered, as if he played sports, football maybe, or lifted in the gym. He had one arm around a thick-waisted girl in a Beach Bum T-shirt, with long hair that blew in pretty tangles around her face. "If you're so hot about it, Sherry," she said to the loud girl, "why don't *you* go?"

"That's a good idea," said the other boy from the van, voice deeper but not too deep, not as deep as the lake or the darkness, not old enough to be too deep. He poked her in the upper arm. "Why don't you take a turn this time?"

"Fuck you, Griff," she said. "You know I can't swim that good."

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"Then just float on your boobs." General laughter, Sherry's pantomime slap, the low arch of the moon behind a drift of carbon cloud.

"It's Griff's turn," said the boy who had turned off the van, now close enough to guess the conversation. "Rob, me, Dan, Griff." He nodded at the sky. "We better get going. It's gonna rain."

"It's not gonna rain, asshole." But Griff began to move toward the water, a freshening stroll that ended with his half-comic dive into the waist-deep darkness, disturbing the austere patterns of star on water. The rest stood watching. He stood, blowing water, swinging at his hair to throw off the excess. The blond boy hollered, "You chummed up good?", and he waved an arm to say, Yes, O.K., then dove again, resurfacing to call, "Better get the truck ready," and down again.

The stork-legged boy hopped into the pickup, circled it so it was winch side in, the back tires brushed every so often by the rising kiss of the water. "Go on," the blond boy said to Lewis. "Get the van."

They watched him lope back to the parking lot, hopping quick and painful on some small booby trap, broken glass maybe. The girl named Sherry snickered. The blond boy said, "You think he'll ever find out about his dog?"

His girlfriend shook her head. "That was mean," she said. "Poor Petey." Sherry snickered again.

"Oh for God's sake," she said. "The dog was twenty years old or something; it was gonna die anyway. Besides, if it wasn't for Petey, we'd've never found those things."

"It was mean," the other girl repeated.

"Hey, the dog's the one that went after the fucking thing —"

"You threw the Frisbee right *at* —"

"Man's best friend," the blond boy said in an easy tone. "Let's forget it. Is there any more beer?"

The van, moving like a tired old dog, rolled in slow idle down to the water's edge. Lewis leaned from the window, checking his proximity, checking down the private side of the beach. Nothing, not even the glitter of beach fires. He flicked the headlights on to shine in patterns on the fractal waves. In the water, Griff waved once as the lights came on.

The blond boy opened a can of beer, and he and his girlfriend began to pass it back and forth. "I wonder what that guy uses them for," she said.

"Who knows. Just be glad he does." The blond boy wiped his mouth on

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his arm.

"He probably chops 'em up for bait or something," Sherry said. "Or, you know, dissects them. For science."

"Science, shit," the blond boy said. "He probably sells 'em to freak shows, those alligator-farm things they got down south. Griff's uncle said he met him at the fair, right? At the sideshow."

"So?"

"So he sells 'em down south or something." His girlfriend, grown bored with the conversation, lifted her lips; they kissed, a long kiss; he rubbed her breast through the T-shirt.

Lewis looked away, toward the diminishing stars, muted as if in denial of the conversation, as if saving up the lightning for later use.

"Maybe medical research," the stork-legged boy said. "You know: cut 'em up and see how they work."

Sherry made as if to snatch the beer from the blond boy, who evaded her with an easy backstep. "I bet you're right," she said. "I bet it's for a carnival or something, 'See the Sea Monster! Wonders of the Deep!' Like a freak show" — growing more animated — "in a tank, you know, and people can go up and touch the glass."

"Fun," the blond boy said. His girlfriend shifted closer to him; almost absently he squeezed one cheek of her ass. Lewis said, "They can drink lightning."

"What?"

"Who can?"

Nodding out past the swimming shape of Griff, to the larger darkness beyond. "Them." No one spoke. "You can watch them," Lewis said. His voice was peculiar, almost too soft for his insistence. "From right here where we are. They stand up, they rise up through the water, and they —"

"Oh bullshit," said the blond boy scornfully. "Nothing can — hey. Hey, I think he's gettin' one! Look." And they all moved a little closer to the water, Sherry wading in to her calves, her knees, the blond boy and his girlfriend close behind her. Lewis stayed farthest behind, sand crusted small on his ankles, the tops of his feet, sweat on his back through the skin of his T-shirt.

In the water, they could see the extravagant gusts of foam, far higher than any wave tonight could warrant. The stork-legged boy backed the pickup a careful foot closer, then checked the chain on the winch.

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"Get ready!" The blond boy's voice had risen with excitement; he sounded younger now. "I think he's coming in."

"Big one," Sherry said. Stepping backward, she almost tripped; Lewis reached to steady her, but, with negligent avoidance, she shook off his touch. In the showy yellow of the pickup's headlights, the stork-legged boy and the blond freed up the winch's chain, unclasping first the heavy hook that bound the loop. The stork-legged boy hopped back into the pickup. The splashing was loud now, strangely rhythmic; they could see, along with Griff, another form. Big. Sherry gave a little whoop, backing up all the way to where the other girl stood beside the van. The wind had risen; the girls' hair blew freely, like streamers at a fair, flags before the freak show. The blond boy gestured with the looped chain to Lewis, like a cowboy with a lariat. "Help me here," he said.

Together, they waded out into the water, closer to the gusting, the artificial bursts of foam. They could see the strong pinwheel of Griff's arms, the heavy wake behind. "Careful," said the blond boy, wading slowly so he did not splash. "He's a big fucker." In silence, they moved on an intersecting line, each increment tolled by sand, the irregular nip of pebbles; the water slapped at their upper thighs in rising rhythm, faster as the foam rose; the startled waves ascended, faster as Griff and the darkness that trailed him grew closer and closer, the girls' small cries and Lewis's sweaty hands on his half of the chain, keeping it steady, holding it tight with the blond boy as the water splashed them to the waist now, higher, the stroking rhythm reaching them at last in a churning freshet of sound and stink and confusion, Lewis's cry and Griff's yell and the blond boy's airless grunt, swinging the chain, heavy chain, swinging it hard. And again. And again, the blond boy almost crying for breath, bending to the whorl of water and swinging once more with the last shattering strength to find, at the end of the chain, quiet. And a dribble like oil on the water, some strange slick rainbow of fluid unseen but felt with the dabbling fingers, with the itching skin of the thighs.

They stood, the three of them, in the abrupt and welcome quiet, the slowing waves; something heavy beneath the water, unmoving, bounded by the circle their bodies made. Panting like warriors, Griff with one hand to his side. "Fuckin' stitch," he croaked. "I almost —" A sigh, and no more talk for a moment; they could hear the girls' voices but none of their words.

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"Didn't I say he was a big one?" The blond boy peering down. Lewis closed his eyes. From the beach the girls called questions; "Stupid," Griff said. "Somebody'll hear."

They bent in purpose, hands working in a rhythm undiscussed, cinching the looped chain around the chest of their quarry, binding it tight. The sky above had lost much of its stars, instead showed the deep bland blankness of an incoming storm. "It's going to rain," the blond boy said. "Let's get this thing in the van."

He waved, to give the sign to the stork-legged boy. The oily sound of the winch, starting up, the strain of metal: hard, to haul this massy weight, drag it through the resisting water, as if the lake itself were unwilling to see it gone. Separately beside it the boys moved in, keeping an eye on the chain, making sure its reel was smooth, its burden safe. When they reached the beach, the girls had the van doors already open.

"Lift it up," Sherry said.

Slippery ripple of uncertain light on heavy green flesh, lagoon green and scales, a salty, oily smell like sardines. Or the sea. The body was easily eight feet long, invested with an almost balletic delicacy about the feet; hands? Part of the scales were missing on the low ridging slope of forehead, a smeary tear, left by the chain, in the flesh there. A ruff as fragile as courtier's lace rose behind the damaged head, moving feebly in an unconscious, respirationlike rhythm. The eyes did not open, but moved beneath the lids, restlessly as a child in a fever, in a disturbing dream. The four limbs were slack, the heavy truncated tail limp against the sand. The chest moved, once, and the ruff shivered, as if in some strange physiological sympathy. Watching, Lewis felt his own chest ache, and turned away as if shamed, turning back to face the dark, starless water and the slowly cloaking stars.

Sherry touched it with one extended toe, on its silent breast; then jerked back, giggling a little too hard.

"It's cold," she said.

"It's supposed to be cold," the stork-legged boy said. "It's a lizard."

"Do you think," said the other girl curiously, "it could be a kind of dinosaur?"

"I'll tell you what I think," her boyfirend said. "I think we better get in the truck; that's what I think. Griff, man, help me with this a minute."

Together, they unlooped the circling knot, unwrapped the chain;

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slowly, the winch drew it back. With the quiet grunting of real exertion, the four boys were able to load the unresisting body into the empty van; it fit well, like a piece in a puzzle: even the tail proved malleable. The stork-legged boy carefully closed the van doors, as carefully tied them shut with the red-coated wire.

He nodded at Griff. "Followed you pretty good back there. Were you scared?"

"Shit yes," Griff said, and they laughed, all but Lewis. "The fucker must weigh four hundred pounds."

"Four hundred pounds," Sherry said; "four hundred dollars." She sounded drunker now. "That guy isn't gonna be there all night," she said. "Are you guys ready or what?"

The stars were invisible now, sheathed by the heavy clouds. Insects moved in the brisk lunatic circles of agitation, smelling the storm, their ballet backlit by headlights, by the faint sizzle of the makeshift light above the boardwalk's parking lot stairway.

The stork-legged boy revved the pickup engine. "Who's ridin' with who?" he asked, and Sherry immediately climbed beside him, slamming the door too hard. The blond, his girlfriend, and Griff were already in the van.

"Lewis," the blond said. "Hey. You driving or what?"

"You drive." Lewis said. "I'm gonna walk back."

The pickup pulled away, taillights bright and gone. "It's going to rain any minute," the blond's girlfriend said warningly.

"You go on," Lewis said. "Thanks anyway." He watched them leave the parking lot, turn left; it was a twenty-minute drive out to the warehouse.

He walked back down to the water, scuffing gently at the sand. His arms ached from exertion, hurt where the chain's friction had abraded. He sat on the very lip of the sand, where the water could touch him, where he could dip a finger if he chose, or choose instead to swim entire, as far as breath could take him, up or down as was his whim. Out toward the horizon, there were the sharp new flickers of the rising storm, still too far to hear their thunder. He thought of a long green body, rising up as if in the grip of some pure epiphany, head thrown back to the long impossible white. Drinking the lightning.

The temperature dropped by five abrupt degrees. If he strained, he could hear the thunder now.

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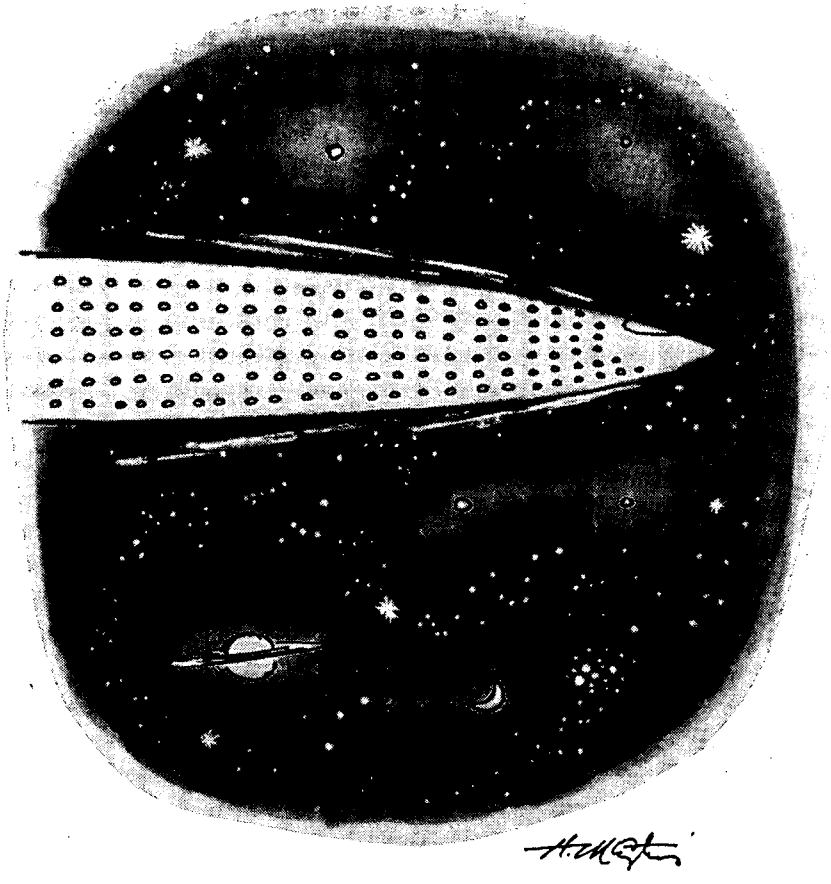
Deep bristle of the long beach grass, insects' last desertion and the faintest incongruity, smell of salt, then swept to nothing by the incoming wind. It grew colder still, too cold to stand before the waves, growing waves rising rough and clean to smooth by their presence churned depths, sand runed by thrashing, by motion, by a cold green body, by disappearances large and small. When at last the storm broke, the beach lay innocent before it, docile and empty as the eyes of a sculpted child.



"Wouldn't you know! It's the same movie we saw going out!"

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Asimov Laughs Again, Isaac Asimov, HarperCollins, $22.00

Outnumbering the Dead, Frederik Pohl, St. Martin's, $14.95

Stopping at Slowyear, Frederik Pohl, Axolotl, Leather $65, Limited Cloth $35, Trade Paper $10.

ISAAC ASIMOV has been with us a good long time, in various guises. One of them, of course, is as a science fiction writer. Another is as a professor of biochemistry at Boston College, although most of us know that he has not in fact taught there for many years. To the outside world he is best known as a science writer, and a very prolific one. Most of his books have fallen into that category, and it seems hardly possible to pick up a journal or a mundane periodical and not find an Asimov article, usually on science, in it.

It is as a science writer, too, that he is known to readers of *F&SF,* having at one point contributed an unbroken string of 399 monthly science fact columns to this periodical. That's over thirty years' worth. That he has also published some science fiction in these pages is almost an afterthought. The bulk of his truly great science fiction appeared in *Astounding,* and to a lesser extent, *Galaxy;* what, is now many years ago.

Not accurate? Well, it is both accurate and wildly inadequate. What Isaac Asimov is is Isaac Asimov; there is no other like him, no other whose body of work is as broad, no other whose range of interests has been laid before the public so thoroughly. Who else has published a Chronology of The World, a History of Physics, a Guide to The Bible, a Guide to Shakespeare, an Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan, and a Chronology of Science & Discovery — to name just a handful out of 466 books so far?

It is not that there are so many books, so much as that there are so many books that are fundamental works on their subject, whatever it

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may be. To have a complete library of Asimov, completely read, at this point is to possess a complete university education. This is a staggering accomplishment. Other persons have written a lot of books; I do not believe any of them have written a lot of nonfiction books. If Isaac had written 466 novels, I do not think more than ten percent of them would have been memorable — not as a consequence of some failing in himself, mind you; it is simply impossible to think of 450+ *good* ideas, and not possible to do justice to even that fraction. A good novel is a delicate thing.

But so many fundamental books — so many books besides novels, and so many good books.... And I am talking about the whole of literature, from its beginnings, in any language. Asimov has done something I think has never been done before — and is not likely to ever be done again.

He did not do this as a planned activity. He did it with six or seven typewriters scattered about a room, in each of which was a book in progress about a subject he happened to have become interested in. When he was done with a manuscript he shipped it off to his editors, and fed a fresh sheet of paper into the now-liberated machine, which instantly became captive to some new preoccupation. And so it went, year after year. The key to understanding this output was that it was, simply, the writing down of what had interested him, and that it was the product of a mind that had never forgotten anything.

Literally. Asimov has that vanishingly rare thing, an eidetic memory. Oh, now that he is in his seventies some of the details of what he was told as a child have begun to blur, but I will wager that is not true of anything he *read* as a child, and as an adolescent, and as a young man, and as a somewhat more mature figure. Literally, anything that passed before his eyes at any point in his life is still instantly available to him.

That of course makes it easier to write books on the subject. He has only to recall everything he has learned about it, put it in some rational order, pass judgement on the relative importance of every fact he wishes to cite, organize an outline of the book, and fill in the blanks, not forgetting the ongoing series of little editorial ruffles and flourishes that make an Asimov book such a pleasure to read. That's all.

One would think that he is possessed of a remarkably high IQ. As a matter of fact, his IQ lies somewhere between 160 and 170, which is high but hardly unprecedented. As he himself points out, it is not IQ but *intelligence* that matters. And in his case, the intelligence is of a range such as the world very rarely sees. More

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important, for a moment, is Where did I get this information? The one thing Asimov has *not* done, in all these 450+ books, is give us much of a look at himself.

I got it by reading *Asimov Laughs Again,* and that is not the only important autobiographical datum I got from this collection of "743 jokes, limericks and anecdotes," of which the anecdotes are by far the most numerous, fascinating, and generally unfunny. The book is called what it is called, but what it ought to be called is *Asimov Talks About Asimov.*

We have had, of course, several volumes of official Asimov autobiography. Fascinating as those are, what they are principally fascinating for is the truly large array of facts they do not give. I honestly can't recall an effort so extensive that gave so little real insight into its subject. It is full of material about what Asimov did, and practically void on how and why he did it, or what he thought of what he had done. Whereas in *Asimov Laughs Again,* the various anecdotes briefly but pointedly tell us any number of things I am not completely sure Asimov really intended to tell us. In that sometimes five or six word part of a sentence, they show us an Asimov who has not often come out from behind the curtain before.

We learn, for instance, that Gertrude Blugerman, his first wife, was vicious and cutting from almost the first days of their marriage on; that he met the present Mrs. Asimov, Janet, some years before the protracted and difficult divorce from Gertrude was obtained, and that there apparently was no hanky panky between Janet and Isaac in the meantime, but that considerable yearning existed. We learn that the mother-in-law, Mrs. Blugerman, hated Isaac and held him in contempt; we learn that Gertrude Blugerman had a brother on whom the sun rose and set, according to his mother, but whom Isaac had little use for because he never accomplished anything. We learn that Gertrude Blugerman died, finally, apparently in a protracted illness that involved considerable pain. (I found that poignant, because Gertrude, whatever she may have been to Isaac, was always very nice to me. I had wondered what had happened to her.)

We learn that Heinlein was not a well rounded man, that DeCamp is all right although inclined to be pedantic; we learn, in other words, what others have observed, but Asimov has not hitherto confirmed. In fact, hitherto, Heinlein and DeCamp and Asimov were a triumvirate at the Philadelphia Navy Yard during World War II, which is true, but it was a triumvirate strictly because circumstances threw them together, and

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did not sit all that well with the young Asimov. (And, incidentally, the John W. Campbell material, what there is of it, is recast, too.)

We learn all sorts of things, ringing clear as a bell in the throwaway lines that are the far most interesting in this so-called joke book. We learn, most important, that Asimov had a miserable childhood; that his father was the lesser of the two in combination with Asimov's mother, and that Asimov's mother was not a lovable character.

Then there is his brother, Stan, with whom he gets along well and is a major figure at *Newsday*, there occupying in his own lesser compass the same sort of place Isaac occupies; regarded with awe, and worshipped. (And apparently not one whit cowed by Isaac's more widespread reputation, in a nice, brotherly affection.) The question is, is that in part because Isaac took the brunt of their mother's idiosyncrasies, which drove Isaac to worldwide prominence? At the very least, I think there's not much doubt Mrs. Asimov left a profound impression on young — and not so young — Isaac, because why else would he have married Gertrude Blugerman?

Well, I'm not going to delve into Isaac any more than that, although only if you buy the book will you see that I am barely touching the surface. More important is why did this wise and wonderful man betray so much in this ostensible book of humor?

He speaks in it, often, of death; of the upcoming end to his career. He has this book, which is #466, and about twenty others in press, but I don't think he considers it would be vital to do #500. He did not do column #400 for this magazine, and surely he could have done. He speaks of death and dying in a way that is accepting — he has had a triple bypass, he obviously has additional troubles, and in any case the thread remaining is surely shorter than the thread unravelled. Possibly, he worked in these biographical details quite deliberately, hiding them, so to speak, so that he both relays them to us and yet does not, so that the lad, Asimov does not betray the propriety of the elder Asimovs' household. He cannot, after all, be blamed if he lets things slip, can he, in this book of jokes? He even makes the point in this book, several times, that at times and in several ways he *does* let things slip even though they hurt him. He can't help it — he says so.

Be that as it may. What emerges from this book is a genius, which we knew, but an *understandable* genius, which I submit we did not. That is a good thing.

I just want to say one thing more: it wasn't as easy as you made it out, was it, conveying young Isaac into

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the future. To some of us, it is important to know that. Live and be well, and in the fullness of time die secure in the knowledge that you will not in fact die. The world is fundamentally different, and better, than if you had not lived. And much as your contemporaries may have accomplished, not many of them have accomplished that, and none as broadly.

Frederik Pohl is three months older than Isaac Asimov. (And was once Isaac's literary agent, although as those of you who read *Asimov Laughs Again* will note, Isaac has "forgotten" that fact.) Frederik Pohl is three months older than Isaac, and in those three months Fred seems to have learned a lot. Despite the fact that Fred has a career that is like Isaac's in the sense that it includes any number of fascinating nonfiction books, (as well as a fair handful of novels which are not science fiction), the essential difference between the two men is that Fred Pohl has been street-smart from birth, whereas Isaac to this day remains in many (most of them glorious) ways a *naif*.

I will not dwell on which is preferable in the long run. I cannot make up my mind, though clearly Isaac has more money. Fred has had more wives. I have been watching both of them like a hawk since 1952, Fred having been my agent, as well, and it has not done me much good.

Fred lives in a detached suburban home, wheras Isaac occupies what is surely one of the more desirable penthouses overlooking Central Park. Fred, on the other hand, travels incessantly, going from China to Zagreb without so much as a blink. What does this prove? Not much. But it accounts for something, which is the closeness with which Fred regards the world we live in, as distinguished from the closeness with which Asimov regards the world we might live in. Some might say that the universe of future centuries which Asimov describes is *lived* in, whereas the universe that Pohl describes is always seen in comparison to ours, so that part of the fascination of a Pohl story is the deliberate breakdown of the glass curtain between the manufactured story and the universe we know. That, too, is as may be. At any rate, there is a fascination, and we are well served as readers for it.

The recent examples of this are two novellas by Pohl, one from St. Martin's and one from Axolotl. The St. Martin's one is part of a series, by various authors, originally published in England — or at least this one volume is, and I don't see why the others should be different.

Outnumbering the Dead takes a simple premise; there is immortality, and "lukewarm fusion" to provide the power to support as many

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people as you like, so that, for the first time, there are more living people than have ever lived, in total. That said, Pohl goes on to tell a simple story without further real reference to this fact.

His story is the story of Rafiel, superb song and dance man doing a song-and-dance version of *Oedipus Rex*. He is all the more superb because of the occasional bobble in the dance steps, this recalling to the audience the fact that Rafiel, unlike the overwhelming majority, will die. The drugs did not work, for him.

He has just emerged from a hospital, where they have done their best for him, again; he looks like a movie star of about forty. But he is actually ninety-two, and very close to the end of his string.

Not much actually happens in the story, although there is incident aplenty. There is his encounter with his father, and the return of Alegretta, his lost love. There is travel from one place to the other. There is his son, who will be born to him and Alegretta. But all the power in this powerful story is in the bizarre case of a member of this society — a valuable and widely known member — actually dying. I recommend it highly.

Even more highly do I recommend *Stopping at Slowyear*, again a quiet novella involving death. In this case, it is partly aboard the superannuated interstellar tramp ship, *Nordvik*, and partly (and finally) on the surface of Slowyear, an out-of-the-way human colony. You will be, I think, both taken with and repelled by what happens when these two groups of humans meet. Again, not much seems to happen. Again, you will be profoundly shaken by what does happen.

(Axolotl, by the way, is an imprint of Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440; every copy is signed by the author.)

The thing that strikes me most of all about these very good books is their being about death; two radically different kinds of death, but death. I know that Fred has no plans to die in the forseeable future. So we must assume that he will go on to other things, again, to add to the very large array of things he has already written about.

And I would very much like to see Isaac do the same.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

And the Angels Sing, Kate Wilhelm, St. Martin's, cloth, 320pp, $19.95

KATE WILHELM'S voice as a writer is not loud; she rarely distracts you from the story by forcing you to pay attention to the storyteller. Neither are her characters the intrusive, larger-than-life figures that so dominate our field. They are quiet people, everyday people, but their pain is as deep, their puzzles as obscure, their despair as devastating as anything experienced by the figures of grand Romantic fiction.

For instance: Eddie, the reclusive, arrogant newspaper editor who, in a fit of inconvenient compassion, picked up a rain-soaked waif, only to discover that it was not the troubled girl from town he thought it was, but rather a stranger, an alien; he learns the great secret of love among humans, that our emotions follow our devotion, even when the one we love gives us nothing measurable in return ("And the Angels Sing").

Or Cory, the dim-witted girl who gets a job with a nurseryman named Whitman and discovers that she has a gift, a wisdom with plants, to make them thrive; somehow this very competence in a person who seems otherwise helpless draws the worst out of a particular kind of man, the best out of another kind ("The Dragon Seed").

Or Beth, who finally gives up her wandering life when it's time to put her daughter, Lissie, in school for the first time just as her husband decides the next trip should be to the wilds of Alaska; Beth goes home, to her mother's judgment and hostility, but soon finds that what she and Lissie brought with them is more dangerous than what lurks in the old Louisville neighborhood ("The Loiterer").

Or Judson, the mathematician who is caught up in a philosophical battle over whether time is slowing down or speeding up, and who never notices that it is his wife, Millie, who truly understands time — no, he will let the debate consume him even though it amounts to nothing in the end ("O Homo; O Femina; O

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Tempora").

Not every story is equally strong, of course. While "The Great Doors of Silence" is an emotionally powerful and frustrating story of the cyclical nature of child abuse, it nevertheless adds little to our understanding of the phenomenon beyond what we learn from case studies, and "The Day of the Sharks," the one never-before-published story in the collection, is one of those stories where the characters seem to be aware of the metaphorical values of their own actions instead of leaving that as a secret between storyteller and audience. But even at her weakest moments, Wilhelm is nevertheless one of our strongest writers; to say that not all her stories are as good as her best is not really even criticism, is it?

Not only is this collection a worthy one in its own right, but it is also a great lesson in what the stories do *not* do: Wilhelm needs no tricks, no cheats, no hipper-than-thou flash and dazzle to do her work. She is not an illusionist, manipulating us with tricks and mirrors. Instead she is the real thing: Wilhelm has the magic that so many others only pretend to have.

"Forward the Foundation," Isaac Asimov *(Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* Nov 91, $3.95)

This review probably should not exist at all. I'm reviewing a work in progress — what has appeared so far is only a novella that comprises perhaps a fifth of what the final text will be. Furthermore, the novella appeared (logically enough) in the magazine that bears the author's name, which is in direct competition with *this* magazine (although Asimov has also been a columnist here for longer than most humans have been alive). Yet when I finished reading the novella, I thought it worth saying a few words about the latest work of the greatest living master of science fiction.

One way of looking at this book (and other recent Asimov novels) is to wonder if Asimov has lost his creative edge and therefore must return to the scene of past triumphs to rake over the coals and try to breathe some new life out of a combination of the Foundation and Robot books.

But if you look at what Asimov is actually doing, you realize that, far from losing his creative edge, he has honed it. Far from trying to repeat past triumphs, in some senses he is actually *undoing* them. For in "Forward the Foundation," he seems to be denying the fundamental premise underlying the earliest of the Foundation novellas and, by extension, all of Campbellian science fiction.

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The Foundation series is built on the premise that in the far future a mathematician named Hari Seldon has invented a science called *psychohistory* (to be distinguuished from the degenerate form of psychobabble biography that uses the same name in our own time) in which human group behavior has been quantified to a degree where quite accurate predictions of major events can be made with a reasonable degree of certainty. Seldon's psychohistory becomes, then, a kind of religion, with the people under the Foundation's sway coming to trust that Seldon's plans for them will all work out well and give them a marvelous destiny.

In simple terms, this is a fictional manifestation of the devout faith in science that marked the hard sf of the Campbellian era and that still is a strong strain running through science fiction today.

In "Forward the Foundation," however, Asimov seems to be contradicting that faith in the knowability of human behavior. It may be, of course, that by the end of the finished novel, Hari Seldon will in fact develop a true science of psychohistory and the rest of the books will be fully affirmed. But in this first novella, at least, Hari Seldon *has* no reliable mathematics of psychohistory, and yet makes exactly the kind of deft interventions in Imperial history that he would do later on under the guise of psychohistory. The implication is obvious: Hari Seldon doesn't *need* psychohistory. It is conceivable that this novel will end with the conclusion that Seldon's psychohistory is a smokescreen — that it is *never* developed at all, and that he uses it only to have greater influence over the events to come.

Whether psychohistory turns out to be real or not in the course of the novel, however, what matters in the *oeuvre* of Isaac Asimov is, perhaps, this one sentence from the novella: "Intuition is the art, peculiar to the human mind, of working out the correct answer from data which is, in itself, incomplete, or even perhaps misleading." By combining Robot and Foundation, Asimov has put himself in the position of having to explain why R. Daneel Olivaw is *now* in fact God; or, in the larger sense, why humans will always be better than their machines. And here is where Asimov gives us his testament of humanism: It is the human mind that has the closest thing to godlike powers that we will ever see, and there is not among our talents the skill to make a machine that is as powerful in *kind* as the best of human minds.

When you combine this with the serious questions raised in

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Foundation and Earth, in which Asimov showed how dehumanizing would be a society in which all individuals suppressed their individual wills for the happiness of all, you begin to understand exactly how and why Asimov has returned to these old stomping grounds. The original concept for the Foundation stories came from John W. Campbell, and Asimov has recorded elsewhere his original reluctance to keep writing Foundation stories. Why? Because he did not believe in their basic premise — the knowability of human behavior. In Asimov's fundamental worldview, the human mind is the knower, not the known. And these recent books exist in order to undo, or at least recast, the meaning of that first trilogy to bring it in line with Asimov's true worldview. What he once did in reliance on Campbell and Gibbon, he must now re-do in light of his own deepest beliefs about human nature and the nature of reality.

That makes these books a noble project, in my view, even when I don't agree with Asimov's worldview myself. Asimov isn't chasing money or fame (he has those), and his mental and artistic powers are undiminished by time. What he is pursuing now in these last fictions is Truth, with whatever clarity he can bring to such a quest. Asimov's health has been none too good of late. His friends worry because, of course, his passing would mean a great loss to them. But I believe Asimov will keep his old machine running, no matter what it takes, at least long enough to put the ending on the great fictional work of his life, which is still unfinished. And if he doesn't, I'll really be annoyed, because I want to know how it all comes out. There have been many writers in the world with a reputation for greatness and wisdom, but I daresay there has never been one who could surpass Asimov's sheer breadth of learning and piercing clarity of vision. This doesn't guarantee that everything he writes will be of surpassing importance and transcendant worth — but when Asimov writes there is always the chance that it *might* be, and of how many other writers can such a thing be said?

The Cat with the Tulip Face, A.R. Morlan (Short Story Paperback #29, Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene OR 97440, paper, 48pp, $1.95); *The Dark Country*, Dennis Etchinson (SSP #21); *Journey to the Goat Star*, Brian W. Aldiss (SSP #22); *I Remember, I Remember*, Mary Caraker (SSP#24)

Just when you think that Pulphouse has already done every weird

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thing you can imagine a publisher to do and made money on it, they come up with something even stranger. And this one is odd indeed: They're publishing short stories as standalone books. Short ones — 48 pages, about the size of a note card, typeset on a laser printer without enhancement technology so you can see the deformation of the characters but who cares? They have to do it inexpensively if they're going to make a profit, and I hope they do, because there's something wonderful about picking up a *book* that you can finish in twenty minutes. And it really does feel like each story is a book. It changes the experience of reading it. It's *not* the same as reading the same story in a magazine or anthology. There's a sense of completeness. Like having a drumroll before you start and a fanfare at the end.

What about the quality of the actual stories? Well, it varies from good in a weird way to just plain good, at least with the stories I've read so far. Some are reprints — for instance, Dennis Etchison's *The Dark Country* is a reprint of his 1981 World-Fantasy-Award-winning short story, along with a new afterword that is fascinating. The story is, as Etchison points out, not even remotely fantasy (yet with that frisson of strangeness that qualifies it all the same), but it *is* moody and powerful.

The Aldiss story, *Journey to the Goat Star*, is absurdism in full flower. You're never altogether sure which of the possible interpretations of the story is "true" — is there (or was there) an actual space flight? Are there aliens? Is the psychotherapist Frazer the same person as the mugging victim Frayser? Did the intruder go out and get in the same car with Gray, who is either a therapy patient or a starship captain? Yet along the way, this story is delicious in its madness, its playful language, its self-consciously convoluted philosophy.

Mary Caraker's *I Remember, I Remember* is a more traditional sf story. Alissa is wakened from cold sleep upon arriving at the planet of destination — but, because of an oxygen-flow malfunction, she has to have her memories restored from an older recording. Something's wrong, though, as she gets on with her life on this new world. Is it her? Or is it her brother's wife? Or nothing at all? A terrific little mystery story that would have done any of the regular sf magazines proud.

Like the Caraker and the Aldiss, A.R. Morlan's story appears in print for the first time in its Short Story Paperback edition. *The Cat with the Tulip Face* is a prequel to Morlan's novel *The Amulet*, which

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I have not read — but I still enjoyed it. I admit that for a long while I thought that it was going to be one of those feel-good cat stories that you can't enjoy unless you love cats so much you don't mind their hairs in the fruit salad. But Morlan takes a nasty little twist at the end that makes you cringe a little at the self-righteousness of people who presume to know what's "best" for animals (we can castrate them, but we'd never use them for *experiments*, for that would be cruel). I'm not sure Morlan meant this story to be as morally ambiguous as I took it to be, but that's not my problem.

Who else is doing stories for this series? In the latest batch there are also stories by David Brin, Lewis Shiner, Karen Joy Fowler, David J. Schow, Jane Yolen, and Brian Stableford. If you know any of those names, you know that this is an eclectic collection — every kind of taste is going to be tickled at least now and then, and this is an almost painless way of getting a chance to try writers that you're a bit leery of, or that you simply have never heard of before.

If you aren't already getting these books, I urge you to contact Pulphouse and give the series a try. It really is a wonderful way to get to know short fiction all over again. It also makes me wish that I had an original short story instead of a reprint to offer them for publication . . . maybe I'll hunker down and write something. I like the idea of a short story coming to life for the first time in this format.

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Mark W. Tiedemann's first short story appeared in Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine *in 1990. Since then he has sold five more stories, including another one that will appear in these pages sometime next year. He is a lifelong resident of St. Louis, and works as a commercial photographer.*

Shattered Template

By Mark W. Tiedemann

KEL OPENED HIS eyes. When he turned his head to the right, black-and-white haze danced across his sight. His head throbbed. In the center of his field of vision was a deep black hole. A few seconds later, he realized it was a gun barrel. He looked past it and saw a thin face, grinning with a mouthful of green teeth.

"God bless it!" the mouth said. Sour breath, likebad pork, made Kel wince. "We got us an angel come from Heaven! You're gonna die, angel!"

Another place, another time, before he came down to Earth, Kel remembered.

Lea. She liked to make love in dim, golden light from her candles, an eccentricity Kel had found attractive. She seemed content with no more than what they could give each other body to body. But eventually she

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brought out her Loop. She offered the palm-sized disk to Kel, and he shook his head.

"Why not?" she asked.

"No," he said. He looked down at his hands and saw that they had curled into white-knuckled fists. He wanted her to put the device away.

Lea looked hurt by his rejection. Kel felt betrayed. Everyone used Loops for sex. The ultimate sharing, the linking of souls. The electromagnetic field it generated was tuned to the emotions, set up a feedback that transferred them one to the other. To sync one's emotions to one's lover was a powerful intimacy, one in which Kel could not — would not — participate.

"Why not?" Lea asked. "I thought you. . . ."

He was grateful she did not say it, but he knew what she meant, and felt mean and ashamed of himself. He swallowed and tried to relax. Maybe, he thought, with her it will be different. Maybe it won't be so bad this time.

"All right," he said. He reached for her. She moved against him, kissed him, stroked him. Then he heard the faint hum of the Loop, felt its silky-cool surface slip between them. He braced himself for the overlap, the merging, the joining, the melding, the binding, the entry, the invasion —

Kel threw her off. He rolled away, shaking violently, his skin cold and dank. He could not look at her. She screamed at him, cursed him that he could not be "normal," and broke several of her candles.

When he could stand, he gathered up his clothes and left. The next day he volunteered for the Recovery work on the surface of Earth.

Like many other towns, Dempsey, somewhere in Idaho, had been sacked, torn apart, burned, and left for dead. The first thing Kel's group did upon arrival was cut down the dead bodies hung throughout the surrounding forest.

Empty-eyed people — mostly women — watched the big, healthy strangers dig graves in a tract of land adjacent to the old cemetery. One by one, then in small groups, the inhabitants of the shattered town came to help.

The church was the only undamaged building. The school had been torched three times. There was an old VFW hall that was salvageable, and Kel was assigned to a group to clean it out and set up a storehouse

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for various supplies. The church became the hospital.

Kel watched the broken town take shape. He was proud of the work they were doing, for the first time in his life content with what he contributed.

The hospital was busiest. Most of the women were pregnant. What surprised the Recovery Team was the number of abortion requests: more than half the women did not want the babies they carried.

The Interface liaison gave lectures on local customs and how best to achieve the goals of Recovery.

"Now, we don't want any martyrs, and we don't want any saviors," he said from his podium. "We're going to see some tapes now of some of the things we can expect to find. Things aren't in as big a mess as they were when we started this project, but they're still pretty disordered out there."

Kel shifted in his chair. Gravity was higher than in the orbitals. Beside him a woman lit a cigarette; the smoke smelled acrid.

"Now," the liaison went on, "all you people have been accustomed to controlled environments. The orbitals don't have weather like you'll get on the surface. A lot of you might be able to tolerate unfiltered air. You've all been given detox injections and allergy pills and a battery of antigens, and all that will help you tolerate it, but none of it will help you *like* it on the surface. You might decide you don't want to give up the comforts of home, especially for a planet that might from time to time try to kill you."

"I'm Ania," the woman beside him said. "We'll be in the same team."

"Hi. I'm Kel."

She waved the cigarette. "Hope you don't mind. Habit I picked up on my first tour of the surface."

"Now," the liaison continued. "Our biggest problem, after five years of Recovery, are these bands of marauders. They're mostly in the rural regions. We haven't had nearly the trouble on the two American coasts as we've had in the plains areas. These bands consist of former survivalists linked up with self-styled 'patriotic evangelists' who have kept a lot of areas in a kind of fief bondage since the Dissolution and Collapse. A few communities have formed into armed enclaves for self-defense, but a lot are pretty much at their mercy. World Confederacy troops have been fighting a pretty effective action against them, but a few are still around, and a lot of the remnants from broken bands still run loose. Besides the

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drought, famine, disease, and depleted resources, you'll have to watch out for these people. They *will* try to kill you."

"Thrilling," Ania said. She smiled at Kel. "Have you got a partner yet?"

Kel found the girl outside of town, hiding along the banks of a narrow stream. He slipped down one of the embankments, into the muddy goo at the water's edge. His boot sank ankle-deep, and when he pulled it out, the sludge sucked at him. He grimaced.

A sharp metallic *clack* electrified him. He looked around at the gray-and-brown scene: two days of heavy rain had turned everything into a dull blur of wet leaves and sodden grass and mud. He nearly missed her in the jumble of interlocking detail. She crouched beneath an overhang of thick tree roots and grassy vines.

Sunken eyes; dirty, straw-colored hair; torn T-shirt; cutoff jeans faded white, then dirtied to a brownish-green. The jeans refused to snap closed over a growing belly. Bare feet. She aimed a .45 automatic at him.

"I'm part of the Recovery project," Kel said, holding up a hand. "I won't hurt you."

"Damn right you won't." She frowned. "You're an angel?"

He laughed briefly. "No, not exactly. I'm from the orbitals, if that's what you mean. Island Four. You've heard of us?"

"Heard. Didn't believe it. Didn't figure Dempsey to be worth the bother."

"Come on back to town. We have a hospital, food. What's your name?"

"Vanny. Yours?"

"Kel."

She stared at him for a long time. He was impressed at how long she could hold the heavy handgun motionless. Impressed and unnerved. Finally he shrugged and worked his way back up the embankment.

He was halfway back to town before he discovered that she was following him.

Roscoe met him at the edge of the perimeter around the Recovery vehicles camped on the outskirts of Dempsey.

"Another one, huh?" Roscoe said. He nodded and patted Kel's shoulder. "Good job. Eventually we might find all of them." He pursed his lips. "Have to get the gun away from her, though."

"I'd leave it for now," Kel said. "She's very defensive. I'm going to get her some soup."

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"She might hurt herself, though."

Kel went to the kitchen. He breathed in the wonderful aromas that drifted from under the plastic tarp. He found a plastic bowl and went to the soup tureen.

A shot cracked the silence. He dropped the bowl and ran back.

Roscoe knelt on the ground, holding his hip. Vanny stood a couple of meters away and watched them all come toward her. She did not look frightened, only annoyed. She was reasonable about it, but she would not give up the pistol.

KEL REMEMBERED Dr. Gallentem. When he was fifteen, Kel had been sent to him for counseling. Dr. Gallentem spoke softly, reasonably.

"Why don't you like the Loop, Kel?"

Kel shrugged. "I don't know. It makes me ill."

Gallentem shifted in his chair. "Kel, I have the records from your nursery. A part of it has always bothered me and maybe relates to this."

Kel's hands tightened on the armrests.

"Apparently," Gallentem went on, "one of your playmates — you were four — obtained his parents' Loop. You were . . . made the subject of an experiment . . . and forced to use it by four of your nursery playmates. Is this accurate?"

"It's not really any of your business."

"I think you need to talk about it to someone. That's my job, Kel. You see, you exhibit some rather extreme inhibitions against sharing. You tend to be selfish with your property and your emotions."

"I keep to myself."

"Indeed you do. And I, for one, am quite concerned about that."

"Is there something wrong with keeping to myself?"

"Introversion isn't necessarily wrong — unless it's pathological."

"So you're saying I'm a psychopath."

Gallentem frowned. "No—"

"I'm messed up because I don't like people crawling around inside my feelings."

"I didn't say—"

"If you like being raped, fine. But leave me out of it."

"Is that how you see the Loop? As rape?"

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"Well . . . no, not exactly. But I don't like it. It scares me."

"Kel—"

"Can I go now? I don't have to do this, do I?"

Ania smoked even in the close confines of the small cabin they shared aboard the Recovery transport.

"Do you know what *I* have?" she asked in her mysterious voice. She smiled at him and reached into her duffel.

Kel leaned against the wall of the small cabin. It was cool against his naked back. Roscoe would be all right, but it would be a while before he could walk without a support. Kel watched Ania abstractedly; there was no telling what she had in her duffel. He had found her to be a most unpredictable person. She had everything: cigarettes, both tobacco and cannabis; mild amphetamines; hallucinogens; aphrodisiacs; alcohol. He did not know where she obtained it; it amazed him how many habits she had formed on the surface.

"A little piece of home," she said, sitting up and holding out a thin disk.

Kel coughed. "You're not supposed to have that. Regs don't allow it."

"Regs be damned. I'm not surrendering completely to barbarian ways. Besides, what they don't know won't bother us." She reached toward him and ran a finger down his chest, over his stomach. "Care to have a little nirvana?"

He looked away. "No."

Ania hesitated, then moved back. "No. Oh. I'm sorry, I thought you liked me, Kel." She shrugged. "I guess I presumed too much."

"What? No, that's not—" He caught her hand and laughed nervously. "We don't need this. We've got it pretty good just the way it is."

"That's what *I* thought. That's why I thought it could be a little better. You know, share more. But if I'm not—"

"No! It's not that! It's *me*! Damnit, Ania, it's *me*!" He tried to pull her to him. She would not look at him. He kissed her neck, tried to find her mouth. Then he gave up. He stood. "Hell with it!" He grabbed his clothes from the floor. "I wish the hell they'd never invented those damn things!"

She looked startled. "You mean — you mean you don't like the Loop?"

"I mean I hate it! It makes me sick! Why'd you have to bring that out? Why can't we just go on the way we were? It was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. I wanted it better."

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"You keep your emotions, I'll keep mine, thank you." He zipped his coveralls and headed for the door.

"I made a mistake, I see. No mixing of the boundaries, Kel? No confusion of identities? It doesn't work that way."

"Ania—"

"Please leave."

"But—"

"Please!"

A woodworking shop was set up in a rebuilt garage. The first products to come out of it were musical instruments. Simple woodwinds and a couple of guitars soon filled the town with music.

Kel ended up on a construction crew rebuilding houses. Vanny brought him lunch every day. Cleaned and in new clothes, she was a pretty girl and younger than Kel had thought. Little by little she began to smile again.

"Never thought we'd be rescued by angels," she said.

"We're just people," Kel protested.

"No. 'Just people' don't do things like this."

"Hmm. Did you live in town? I mean, before—"

"No, I have a place about two miles out east of here. The last raid came while I was in town getting supplies, though." She touched her stomach. "Some folks aren't too pleased about me keeping this."

"Why?"

She glared at him. "You didn't see it happen; you don't know. They come into town and sorted people out. There weren't many children anymore, because in other raids they took them to raise them into killers like themselves. They locked all the men up in the school gym and then started raping us. They stayed a week. Then they burned the school down. They shot a lot of men who escaped, caught a bunch more and hanged them. A few managed to get out. A lot of us got pregnant. I don't think most would want a baby got that way."

"I meant why are you keeping yours?"

"Oh." She blushed a little, then shrugged. "Doesn't make sense to throw everything out."

Kel waited for her to speak again. When she remained silent, he said, "I'd like to see your place sometime. Before we go."

She smiled at him. "Really? I think I'd like that. But later. After my

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baby is born. You'll be staying till then, won't you?"

"Sure. We have a crop to get in by spring. We'll be around."

"Good." She squeezed his hand.

Ania invited him back. A month went by before she again brought out the Loop.

"Why do you do that?" Kel demanded.

"Because I love you, that's why."

Kel shook his head. "Then what do you need that for?"

"You really ought to talk to someone about this problem—"

"I went through therapy years ago, thank you. They decided I didn't need any more."

"It wasn't successful."

"I know I have a problem, but I'm through apologizing for it. Human beings got along for millennia without that thing. Why, after only a couple of decades, has it become the *only* way to make love?"

"It's not. But it's one way and a very good way. It makes it complete, Kel; don't you understand that? We can share our feelings."

"*Tell* me your feelings, damnit it! I'll be glad to share them!"

"But you don't *feel* them, do you? I tell you how I feel. Fine. Do you really *know* what I'm feeling? Or is the best approximate guess good enough for you?"

Kel snatched the disk off the mat. He tucked it into his pocket. "I'm going to bury this thing."

Ania lunged for him. "Give it back!" She pulled him around and slammed him against the wall, then scrambled for his pocket.

Kel shoved her across the cabin. She fell to the mat.

"That's my property!"

"What are you going to do, tell the Team Commander? You know you're not supposed to have this thing down here."

"You bastard!"

"Right. If that's how you feel. I think I'm getting a pretty close approximation. When you want to settle this, we can *talk*. With words. You know?"

"Do it your way or not at all? No thanks, Kel. That's exactly the kind of crap the Loop made obsolete."

Kel left the small cabin quickly. He did not bury the Loop, though, but kept it in his pocket.

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VANNY GAVE birth to a boy. Sweaty and tired, laughing breathily, she demanded to hold it even before the doctor could bathe it. Kel had held her hand through delivery.

"Three point seven kilograms," the doctor announced as he set the infant in Vanny's arms. Vanny frowned uncertainly. "Eight pounds, three ounces," the doctor translated.

"A new start," she said. She smiled at Kel and gripped his hand.

Several other women who had decided to keep their babies gave birth that week and the week after. A new sound was added to the cacophony of reconstruction: infants crying.

The crops were coming in well. The hybrid wheat and corn they had brought down thrived in the rich loam.

People from other parts of the country were drifting into town. More men arrived. Recovery transports brought an influx of new settlers.

Vanny tugged at him excitedly, dragging him from town. With a couple of sacks of supplies, they walked an old road into the woods. Vanny had left Adam in the care of a neighbor and could not wait to show Kel her place. Her enthusiasm was infectious.

Sunlight set the new spring leaves afire with green-gold light. On the orbitals, there were no seasons. It was one of the things Kel decided he would miss from the surface when he returned home.

Dempsey was almost self-sufficient again. Soon his team would be packing up and leaving. In another week a garrison would be arriving to police the area, and then Kel would have to face saying good-bye. But not just yet.

Vanny said nothing about the place until they arrived. A clearing in the middle of the woods nestled the one-story wooden house. The paint was badly weathered, the lawn had gone to seed, and vines were crawling up the pylon of the solar dish. There was an oil furnace and a wood-burning kiln side by side in the rear, not far from a root cellar.

"Looks like the place was built to be self-sufficient," Kel said.

"Dad built it that way," she said. At the front door, she hesitated. Then she felt above the sill and found a key. She unlocked the door and hurried inside.

Kel followed. The air was pleasantly musty. Light filtered through

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drawn shades and old venetian blinds, turning the walls mustard. The air roiled with dust motes. Everything was very still; the house seemed to request quiet, as if it were waiting for the return of an old friend. Separate doors led from the living room to both the kitchen and bedroom, which also shared a door. There was a basement, an attic, and a back porch enclosed by glass.

The bedroom contained a narrow single bed, two nightstands cluttered with tissue boxes, medicine bottles, pictures, a coffee cup that was encrusted with green-white mold. Vanny stood in the door and stared at the bed.

The kitchen had a six-burner oven, a microwave, hot pad with coffeepot, a stainless-steel double sink, and both a refrigerator and freezer. Kel wrinkled his nose at the thought of opening either one.

"I'll see if I can get some power for us," he said.

"I'll make some coffee, then," Vanny said. "The gas ought to work."

Kel came back into the kitchen. Vanny was stacking dishes in the sink. There was water from a hand pump mounted above the sink. She had a flame up beneath the old steel coffeepot.

"Do you have an ax?" he asked. "The solar still works, but the trees nearby are blocking the sunlight."

"In the closet," she said, pointing.

He took his shirt off; it was soaked with sweat. Something clattered to the floor.

"What's that?" Vanny asked, grabbing it before he could reach it.

"Uh — it's a, uh — well. . . ."

She looked at him curiously, holding the small disk.

"It's called a Loop," he said finally, reaching for it. She turned away, holding it just out of reach. "It's a biofeedback device. It, uh, generates an electromagnetic field that matches the alpha patterns of the person holding it and, uh, allows another person to feel the pattern."

Her eyes widened. "You mean like feelings?"

"Yes. It will let you feel what someone else is feeling."

"That's fantastic! What do you use it for?"

Kel's discomfort was acute, and he was irritated at her. Impatiently, he said, "We use it for sex."

"You mean you can get inside each other's feelings while you're making love?"

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"Something like that." He went to the closet and grabbed the ax.

"That's . . . wonderful!"

Kel grimaced. "Maybe you might think so. I don't care for it. Excuse me; I have to chop some wood."

"If you don't like it, why'd you bring it along?"

Kel walked out the door. Vanny was suddenly no different than anyone else Kel had ever known. No different than Lea or Ania or his "friends" who had terrified him with it when he was young. He was disappointed. He had forgotten about the Loop, that it was in his pocket. Why had he not buried it like he had threatened?

He attacked the tree nearest the solar dish. He paid no attention to anything but the steady swing of the ax. The tree fell, and he went to the next one.

Halfway through, something cracked against his head.

The fat one was Vic. Compared to the other two, he seemed fastidiously clean, almost obsessive, but he was obese.

"We ought to kill him!" the one with green teeth, named Davey, insisted.

Kel was still groggy. Things refused to stabilize; the floor felt mobile, detached from the ground.

"No," Vic said, "not yet." He looked at Kel expressionlessly. He pulled a big, thick black-bound book from his satchel. "You're a man, not an angel. Blasphemy hangs on you like a scourge." He glanced at the one named Stu, who was heavyset, with a wide, compressed face. "I must sanctify the woman. Bring him into the bedroom so he can see what his meddlin' hath wrought."

Davey and Stu grabbed Kel's arms and brought him forward.

Vic had tied Vanny to the bed with old towels and a bandanna. Her face, as she looked at Kel, was rigid, emotionless — except her eyes. Kel looked at her eyes and thought of hammers. She was looking for something to smash. With the shards she could kill.

Vic cleared a nightstand with a sweep of his arm. He set the book down and turned to Kel. "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword. She who lives by lust shall be purified by righteous duty. You'll learn, meddler, that woman is only a weak, filthy vessel, fit only to receive the seed of man and give him sons. She has no place denying this duty."

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Everything stabilized suddenly. Kel glared at Vic.

Vic unbuckled his belt. "Take him out," he said. "I'll call you when it's your turn."

The door shut, and Davey punched Kel behind the ear. He staggered across the kitchen and caught himself on the edge of the oven. When his vision cleared, he saw the blue flame beneath the coffeepot, then glanced to his left and saw Davey, holding his revolver on him.

"She must be some kinda sinner," Davey said. "Yes, sir, Lordy. We come here a year ago and purged this whole valley. Town was full of sinners. Vic knew what to do. 'Course, we had an army then! Now — hell, bunch o' goddamned foreigners, called themselves militia, ambushed us couple o' weeks back. Just like we did you, eh? Killed a lot o' my friends, angel. Just killed 'em! Foreigners!"

Kel listened for a sound from the other one. Where was he? He heard footsteps and guessed they were by the pantry.

"Any food in there?" Davey asked.

Kel glanced sideways. Davey was looking away. Heart thundering, Kel grabbed the coffeepot and whirled. The instant before it impacted, Davey turned. Then the coffeepot slammed into his head, and boiling coffee sprayed everywhere. Kel felt it burn his hands, arms, face. Blood spurted from Davey's mouth and nose. The revolver fell. Kel grabbed it from the floor and raised it as Stu was pulling his own from the holster. The blast, so close, pierced his hearing. Stu's chest burst open, and he folded in on himself.

Davey groaned. Kel hit him with the barrel, twice, shattering his skull.

Three strides took him through the bedroom door.

Vanny had gotten one hand free, but Vic's weight pinned her. His immense buttocks jiggled as he thrust; and she clawed at his back. Kel drew back the hammer and aimed. He did not want to hit Vanny, but they were so close.

Suddenly Vic looked at him. His mouth hung open, and his jowls fluttered with effort. He hesitated, then grinned at Kel. It was a taunt; Kel understood its message clearly: *you can't do it.* Vic closed his eyes and continued.

Kel went up to the edge of the bed and dropped to his knees. Vic opened his eyes again. Seeing Kel, his eyes widened, and a shudder ran

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through him, and Kel knew Vic understood that he had underestimated the angel. Kel shoved the barrel at Vic's face and pulled the trigger.

Kel fell back. Vanny's panicked, whispery scream was the only sound other than the ringing in Kel's ears.

He pushed the pistol away and stood. Trying not to look at the ruin of Vic's head, Kel hauled him off the bed. Vanny untied herself. She was spattered with blood. Kel reached to help her. She slapped at his hands and growled at him from low in her throat. She freed herself and hurried from the room. A few seconds later, Kel heard the shower.

He saw the Loop on the floor. Not sure what he intended, he snatched it up and pocketed it. Then he tried to clean up the mess. He wrapped Vic's head in a bed sheet and dragged the corpse out into the backyard. Then he carried out the other bodies.

It had not quite impacted that he had killed three people. When he realized that, he immediately tried to distance himself from them. Not people. Raiders. Animals.

He drew water and took a bucket into the bedroom. He cleaned most of the blood and bits of flesh and bone. He did the same in the kitchen. The water in the bucket was sickly red.

Vanny came back into the bedroom wrapped in a robe. She held herself, arms around her waist, and examined things with wide, suspicious eyes.

Kel held out his hand. She shook her head.

"I—," he began, then choked. He took out the Loop. "We have to change what we feel. I need help."

Vanny stared at the Loop, at first uncomprehending, then with clear fear. She started shaking her head and backing away.

"Vanny, please! I'm not like him! We both need to know that!" He did not want to cry or beg. He was afraid that would ruin her reactions with pity. "We'll go outside. You can run if you want."

He did not know why that convinced, but it did. He followed her out the front door. They knelt before each other in soft humus, and Kel held the Loop between them. She drew a deep breath and laid her hands on it, on his.

Everything he had ever feared wrapped around him and suffocated him. For a moment, it was not painful. Then he realized that the humiliation, the sense of griminess, was not his but Vanny's. He wanted to clean it away, remove the tarnish. He reached forward.

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At the core of her was an electric frenzy of anger and pain. When he touched it, he felt grounded, like a demon impaled with iron.

"It hurts!" he cried. "Stop it!" He saw the grinning faces around him and struggled at his bonds. He was confused and did not know who he was. The sensations he received through the minds of his tormentors were ugly, hurtful things. The more it hurt, the more they fed him. They would not stop; they would not go away — and when it was over, all he knew was that he could not be someone else and forget. He wanted to shout at everyone that it was not his fault, but he did not know who to tell or why he should feel so guilty. He felt punished for something he could not remember doing. He could not accept the senseless simple meanness of it, the innocent-seeming malice of his playmates who did not understand that they were tearing him apart.

He opened his eyes. Vanny's teeth were clenched and bared, but her face was wet with tears. Kel wanted to break contact, run away.

Vanny gripped his hands tightly.

He closed his eyes and gave himself to her. *Examine me,* he thought. *I am not your enemy.*

KEL SAT at the foot of the transport-vehicle ramp and watched all the preparations for departure. German and Polish troops had arrived to police the area. No one thought they would be needed for very long. The Recovery Team had done its job well.

"Are you hungry, Kel?"

He looked up at Ania and shook his head. She gave him a strained smile.

Vanny approached them, holding her baby on one hip. The boy regarded the vehicle, the people, Kel, Ania, the activity, with the same large-eyed awe, as if they were all the same thing. Kel watched her, feeling apprehensive. His fingers flexed on his knees.

Ania met her a few meters away.

"How is he?" Vanny asked.

"Recovering," Ania said. "It'll take time."

"I know. I—" She frowned, shook her head, and looked away.

"He's going straight back up to Island Four," Ania said. "He can get better treatment there."

Vanny was crying. Kel frowned. He did not want her to cry. He opened

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his mouth to say so, but then she looked away from him, so he closed it again.

Vanny pulled something from her pocket and handed it to Ania.

"I'd like him to come back someday," she said. "If he does, I don't think we'll need this."

Ania frowned at the small disk. "No, I don't think you will."

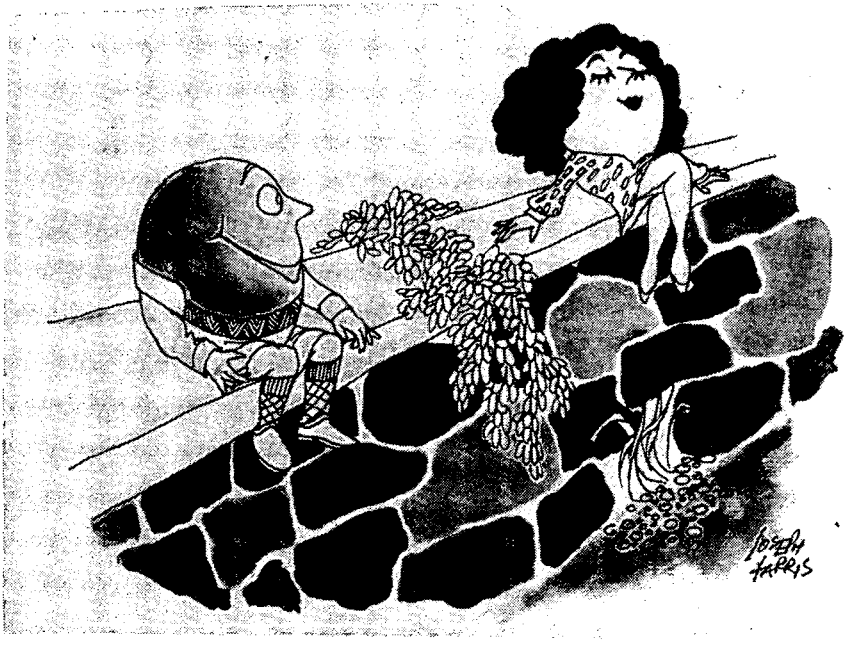
"He — let him know that what he did worked. At least for me. I'm just sorry it didn't work both ways." She seemed about to say something else, then smiled. "You take care of him now," she said.

Ania nodded and put the Loop in her pocket. Vanny waved at Kel and hurried away.

Ania touched Kel's hair. He was proud that he did not wince this time. He knew he was getting better already.

"You'll be home soon," Ania said.

Kel smiled at her. The new town stood around them. Kel was pleased he had done so much here. But though he was not sure how, he knew he was taking home more than he had brought.



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Bonita Kale's short fiction has appeared in Aboriginal SF. *She is part of an active group of science fiction writers in the Cincinnati, Ohio area. "Miracle in a Small Village" marks her first appearance in F&SF. This lyrical story emphasizes one of this issue's motifs: an odd and varied look at mysticism in everyday life.*

Miracle in a Small Village

By Bonita Kale

IN 1881 MANUEL'S older brother, Juan, came home to the tiny village of Huacacuna. He brought little news. The Chileans were still in Lima, he believed, but he was not sure. He had a bullet in his hip, and was sick, and did not much care if the Chileans kept all of Peru as long as they left him alone.

Manuel's mild interest in cities and fighting disappeared as he watched his brother's hip fester. Every day, Juan lost strength. Spring came, and Manuel worked the land alone. His mother stayed near the stone hut to tend to Juan.

On All Saint's Day, Manuel went alone to the cemetery. He set out candles and a dish of potatoes for the dead. One had to do that, even when one's own stomach rumbled. He warmed his hands under his poncho and wondered what he and his mother would do when Juan, too, was dead.

He came home in the evening to find his mother kneeling on the

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ground, her back toward him as he stooped to enter the hut. "No!" she was crying. "He cannot be dead; my beautiful big boy cannot be dead!"

If he had been a child, Manuel could have run away. If he had been an adult, he thought, he would have known wise and consoling words to say. But he was twelve years old, and his mother was crying, and he did not know what to do.

She turned up to him with tears running over her cheeks. "What will we do? What will we do without Juan?"

Manuel tried saying what he had heard from others: "He is with the angels, Mama."

"The angels! What do the angels need with my strong son? Do they need the ground dug or the seeds planted in Heaven?" She dropped her head on Juan's unmoving chest and wailed. The remaining daylight shone through the low door and lit up Juan's patched red blanket and his mother's black hair.

Manuel felt choked with his longing to do some great deed, some mighty act to right the world for his mother. His eyes ran from the hut's dirt floor to its thatched roof, and found no help. But at least he could say something, something strong, like a man! He stuck his skinny right arm out from under his poncho and tried to make his voice deep. "Mama, if I could give this arm and get Juan back, I would do it." He shook her by the shoulder. "If the gods would take my arm in exchange for Juan's life, I would let them! Witness it, Blessed Virgin — witness it, saints! I would give this arm!"

But his mother shrugged him away and continued to weep.

Behind him, Manuel felt a warm breath, like a foretaste of summer coming through the door. Warm but wet, unlike the dry air of the hillside. "Mama—"

Then the hot, wet air swirled around him and seemed to catch hold of his right arm, tight, as if he'd stuck it into a hole and couldn't get loose. He felt a tug. A harder tug. Then a sudden twist at his shoulder. He heard a loud cracking sound, and screamed as he felt himself coming apart. Then his arm was wrenched from its socket, and he lost consciousness.

During Manuel's long recovery, his brother worked like two men in the fields. His mother buried Manuel's arm and tended him with nervous devotion. To the village, she said Manuel didn't know what had happened. Huacacuna began to look askance at the one-armed boy who couldn't remember.

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Two years later Manuel sat beside his mother's deathbed and wiped a tear from his eye. His mother could not speak, but he thought her eyes followed his arm — not reproachfully, but with a faintly wistful air.

He made a scandal by not attending her funeral. His brother was especially affronted.

Manuel never attended a funeral again. When his own wife was dying, he ran away. His youngest daughter found him at the cemetery, crouched in front of a crude altar set out with food. He was rocking on his heels and crying, clutching at the empty socket of his right arm in an agony of grief and fear. He was stone sober. Although he had plenty of chicha with him, he was afraid to drink it, afraid of what it might make him do.

Manuel's eldest daughter married a well-respected man, and made no secret of her embarrassment at her father's comparative poverty. His two sons set out to walk to Cuzco and become rich. Manuel knew he wouldn't see them again. Those who left the village were rarely heard of afterward. Cuzco seemed as far away as Lima, and much farther than Heaven.

His youngest daugher was wild. When she gave birth, she would not name the child's father; nor, the village claimed, could she if she would. She lived with Manuel and cooked and spun and worked the land, and her baby rode her back.

Manuel was by now a grandfather five times over, but he took a fancy to this new granddaughter. He held little Shanti in his arm and let her reach for the tasseled earflaps of his knitted *chullo*. He played with her and even sang to her in his old voice, abraded by work and chicha. She was healthy and robust; he delighted in her fat, strong fingers and bright eyes. At fiestas, he watched her watching the dancers, and when he danced, he imagined her watching him.

The winter of 1918 brought an influenza of extraordinary ferocity. In two weeks, half of Huacacuna had a cough. Manuel himself became ill. For a time, he lay burning with fever and could not work. Then he recovered. His baby granddaughter cried all one night, then seemed well.

Then his daugher sickened. She was hot; then she was very hot. She coughed, and she cried with the pain. Manuel held the baby to her breast. He knelt before her and watched the baby suck, and tried to understand. The baby had lived, and he, an old grandfather, had lived. But a strong

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young woman was dying.

All over the village, it was the same. Many young mothers and fathers died; many orphaned children and bereft old people survived. The village had known influenza before, but not like this. Manuel shivered and clutched his empty shoulder. His daughter coughed up blood.

Her death left Manuel alone with the baby. "Send her to the nuns at Cuzco," the villagers said. Two of the surviving young men were going there, and agreed reluctantly to carry the child. "The nuns may know a wet nurse. At least they cannot know less about babies than an old man with one arm."

Manuel's oldest daughter had also died in the plague. Manuel went humbly to his son-in-law and begged enough money to buy a goat. He learned to milk the goat one-handed, to feed and dress the baby. "She will die," everyone said, but little Shanti lived and throve.

When planting time came, she was over a year old. Every day, Manuel carried her an hour uphill to his potato field, or two hours downhill to his wheat field. All day she played while he wrestled the land into submission. Over and over he braced the handle of his wooden *tajlla* against his belly, stepped on the foot bracket, bent over to grasp the hand peg, and shoved, plowing a forearm's length of land at a time. Then he went over the same ground, planting. There was no daughter to help him now. Sometimes in the evenings, he wondered what would happen to Shanti if he died of exhaustion while carrying her home.

WHEN SHE was three, Shanti was walking to the fields with him, and dropping seeds in the furrows he dug. He made her a little *tajlla* and let her make shallow holes, sometimes gave her a few of his precious potato eyes to put in them, or a little wheat. "He is soft over that child," the village said. "What does a crazy old one-arm know about teaching a girl child?"

Manuel planted and harvested and did not listen. He had one wish: to live long enough to see his granddaughter grow up. He had no money, only the right to farm two bits of land. But that was worth something. He imagined Shanti growing straight and beautiful, making a good marriage. She was big for her age, and bright, with eyes that saw and understood all he showed her.

Manuel stooped in the sun and slashed at weeds and remembered his

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life. He thought of his mother and of Juan. He remembered losing his arm — not the pain, but the snapping of tendons, the crack of the bone. Even now the memory made him shiver, and cold sweat trickled down his backbone.

Now Juan was several years dead. Everyone died in the end, Manuel thought. One man might pray to the Virgin, another curse all the gods, but they all died. One might give money to dress the statue of Santiago in fine clothes. Another might even have a brother who would give up an arm —but eventually everyone still died.

The sun warmed Manuel's back, and he rubbed his shoulder socket and thought an old one's thoughts. When he heard Shanti laugh, he smiled faintly.

He thought of the villagers who had said — still said! — that he should send her to the convent in Cuzco. He imagined the convent as a huge stone structure, like the ancient temple from which villagers got the stones for their huts. He imagined Shanti crying among strangers, then slowly turning into a city person — reading and writing, spending her days however people did spend them, who had no land to work. If she remembered her life in the village, she would be ashamed. And he would never see her again.

At the next fiesta, he might buy Shanti a little hat. He tugged his own hat down more firmly over his *chullo* and bent to retrieve his hoe.

The fiesta of Corpus Christi came in June. Half the village would be walking to Pisaq with the statue of Santiago. With everyone else, Shanti and Manuel went to stand before the little chapel and watch the dressing of Santiago for his visit. Shanti ducked and wriggled and tugged Manuel as near to the front as she could get.

Carefully, men of the village unwrapped the elaborate clothing, blue and white and gold. Piece by piece, they put it on, while the flutists practiced their tunes. The saint and his rich apparel, paid for with years of sacrifice, were by far the most beautiful and costly things in the village. His tin sword was polished till it gleamed, and his halo was set with bright stones. Feathers and intricate embroidery adorned his clothes. Manuel and Shanti filled their eyes with his color and richness.

One boy, older than Shanti, poked her. "Go stand with the girls!"

Shanti held Manuel's leg and didn't move. Manuel stared at Santiago, brilliant in the sun, as he was set upon his flower-bedecked platform.

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Sturdy poles stretched out before and behind it. The saint would start out earlier than the rest of the village. Burdened with his weight, the porters would walk slowly. Anyone who wanted to walk with the procession could easily catch up.

The boy poked her again. "You're a girl; go stand with them!"

The girls were in a group, well behind the men and boys. Shanti could see better where she was. But the boy wouldn't stop poking her. Then he started to brag. "When I grow up, I, too, will carry Santiago."

"So will I," said Shanti. Manuel heard her, distantly. He was remembering when he and Juan had jointly contributed to fiestas and helped carry the saint.

"You will not," said the boy. "Only men can carry Santiago. Men are strong. Women are too weak to carry a saint."

"I'm strong!" said Shanti, and started to cry. "I'm strong; Grandfather says I am! I can carry a saint!" She tugged at Manuel, and he patted her head absently.

A few of the big boys, nine and ten years old, heard her and laughed.

"I can!" she cried.

Sixteen men, eight before and eight behind, placed themselves under the carrying poles. They bent their knees, fit their shoulders into position, and slowly, carefully, began to raise the saint.

Shanti let go of Manuel and leaped forward to join them.

Manuel, still half lost in memory, grabbed at his granddaughter, but got only a handful of her skirts.

Off-balance, Shanti fell forward, slamming into the knees of the porter nearest her. He staggered, almost caught himself, then crumpled against the man beside him.

Then the whole huge platform tipped, the helpless saint sliding sideways. Villagers leaped to avoid the platform, or to save the saint.

To Manuel, wrenched suddenly into the present, the platform seemed to subside with a ponderous dignity. He was shoving his way through the crowd as the base hit the ground on one side, then the other. One corner settled firmly on, then into, Shanti's chest. Several paper flowers, red and blue and yellow, slid off the platform onto her.

Time resumed its normal pace. Manuel fell forward, trying to reach her, crawling between people. He heard without attending the screams of the village, the groans of someone else who had been hurt. He knelt beside

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his granddaughter.

Shanti's eyes were closed. Her open mouth was a shining pool of dark red blood. Manuel stared into it as into a deep well, seeing glints of reflected sunlight, but no motion. Shanti was dead.

Then Manuel was shoved aside. He sat on the ground where he had been pushed, staring straight ahead. Motion was all around him, but he heard nothing, saw only what passed before his eyes. A woman walked by, helping a man to walk. Manuel's son-in-law appeared, lips moving, carrying Shanti's body. Someone picked up the saint's tin sword. Someone else went by carrying paper flowers.

Manuel sat and rubbed his empty shoulder socket with his hand. Part of him was in flight, running back through the years to a crude altar where he could rock and weep.

But another part of him was having a vision — no, two visions. One was a sightless blank, a memory only of pain and maiming, and of a body giving up its integrity.

The other vision, as vivid and colorful as his fiesta poncho, was of Shanti, lying still with a motionless pool of blood in her mouth.

Unbearables met.

Manuel chose.

Almost inaudibly, his voice fuzzy with terror and missing teeth, but with full intent, he said, "If the gods wish it, I would give this arm for Shanti's life." He raised his voice. "Witness it, Santiago! Witness it, Blessed Virgin!"

Once more he felt the hot, damp breath. His terror was sharper, more focused, than it had been forty years ago. It knifed upward through his diaphragm to his throat, an unuttered scream. Then came the twisting, dismembering pain, instantly familiar, though not exactly the same. His old, tight muscles might be more reluctant to give, but the old bones broke apart more easily. He fainted more quickly, perhaps.

And his recovery was much slower. Manuel's son-in-law paid for a woman to come every day and tend him, but for many weeks, Manuel didn't know that. He knew nothing but sleep and pain, alternating and sometimes simultaneous. He tossed with fever and bloodied his mouth and nose on the ground because he could not catch himself. And always he cried for Shanti, but she never came.

Finally he began to think and remember. He opened his eyes and saw

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his hut, and his hat, and his old striped blanket over him. The door flap was down, but it bulged and moved as if someone was outside. "Shanti?" Manuel asked.

The motion of the flap stopped. A village woman stooped and came into the hut. "Shanti is well," she said briskly. "It is a miracle of Santiago that she was not killed."

The woman laid aside the spindle she carried, and put her arm behind Manuel's head to help him sit. Weak and armless, he was unsure of his balance.

"We all thought she was dead," the woman continued, picking up her work again and standing up. She dropped the spindle and twisted the thread. "We thought she was dead — then she coughed and sat up and started to cry. There was hardly a bruise on her chest! A true miracle! And for that little rogue, too, who caused enough trouble for an earthquake! Santiago's robe torn, Ramon's leg broken. Your arm."

Manuel watched the spindle drop, the thread twist. From now on, he would beg from his son-in-law every bite he ate. But there were more important things to think of. "Shanti? he said again. "She is really well?"

"Did I not say so?" Wind the thread; drop the spindle.

"Then where is she? I want to see her."

"You know you cannot take care of a little girl."

"I know," he said. It hurt to admit it. "But Shanti is not so little. Soon she will be taking care of me."

The woman wound her thread slowly, and did not let the spindle fall again. She looked at her feet.

Manuel was terrified. "What is wrong?" he demanded. "Where is Shanti?" He fell back, breathless, and his head hit the stone wall of the hut.

The woman knelt beside him, lifted and tugged at him till he was lying flat again. "There," she said. "Lie still now; you need to rest."

Manuel opened his mouth.

"Shanti is not here," the woman told him quickly. "Don't you see? You cannot take care of her. And there is no place in the village for her to go."

He tried to shout, but the shout came out a whisper. "May Illapa the Lord of Thunder strike you dead if you do not answer me! Where is Shanti?"

The woman picked up her spindle, stood, and stooped to go through the door. "She is where she belongs, of course — where you should have sent her in the first place. She is with the nuns. At Cuzco."

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Birthdays. We all have them, and we all choose to celebrate them in different ways. Robert Reed has taken a twist on a familiar concept, and has given Birth Day celebrations a new, and interesting meaning. Robert Reed has made numerous appearances in this magazine. He has also sold a number of novels, the latest being The Remarkables. *which just appeared from Bantam Spectra.*

Birth Day

By Robert Reed

JILL ASKS HOW she looks.

"Fine," I tell her. "Just great, love."

And she says, "At least look at me first. Would you?"

"I did. Didn't I?" She's wearing a powder-blue dress — I've seen it before — and she's done something to her hair. It's very fine and very blonde, and she claims to hate it. I don't like how she has it right now. Not much. But I say, "It's great," because I'm a coward. That's the truth. I sort of nod and tell her, "You do look great, love."

"And you're lying," she responds.

I ignore her. I'm having my own fashion problems of the moment, I remind myself. She caught me walking across the bedroom, trying to bounce and shake myself just so —

"Steve?" I hear. "What are you doing?"

"Testing my underwear," I say with my most matter-of-fact voice. "I

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found only one clean pair in the drawer, and I think the elastic is shot. I don't think I can trust them."

She says nothing, gawking at me.

"I don't want anything slipping during dinner." I'm laughing, wearing nothing but the baggy white pair of Fruit of the Looms, and the leg elastic has gone dry and stiff. Worse than worthless, I'm thinking. An enormous hazard. I tell Jill, "This isn't the night to court disaster."

"I suppose not," she allows.

And as if on cue, our daughter comes into the room. "Mommy? *Mommy!*"

"Yes, dear?"

"David just threw up. Just now."

Our daughter smiles as she speaks. Mary Beth has the bright, amoral eyes of a squirrel, and she revels in the failures of her younger brother. I worry about her. Some nights I can barely sleep, thinking about her bright squirrel eyes —

"Where is he?" asks Jill, her voice a mixture of urgency and patient strength. Or is it indifference? "Mary Beth?"

"In the kitchen. He threw up in the kitchen . . . and it *stinks!*"

Jill looks at me and decides, "It's probabaly nerves." Hairpins hang in the corner of her mouth, and her hands hold gobs of the fine blonde hair. "I'm dressed, honey. Could you run and check? If you're done bouncing and tugging, I mean."

"It's not funny," I tell her.

"Oh, I *know*," she says with a mocking voice.

I pull on shorts and go downstairs. Poor David waits in a corner of the kitchen. He's probably the world's most timid child, and he worries me at least as much as Mary Beth worries me. What if he's always afraid of everything? What kind of adult will he make? "How do you feel?" I ask him. "Son?"

"O.K.," he squeaks.

I suppose he's embarrassed by his mess. He stands with his hands knotted together in front of him, and his mouth a fine pink scar. The vomit is in the middle of the kitchen floor, and Mary Beth was right. It smells. Our black lab is sniffing at the vomit and wagging her tail, her body saying, "Maybe just a lick," and I give her a boot. "Get out of there!" Then I start to clean up.

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"I didn't mean to . . . ."

"I know," I reply. This is a fairly normal event, in truth. "How do you feel? O.K.?"

He isn't certain. He seems to check every aspect of himself before saying, "I'm fine," with a soft and sorry voice.

His sister stands in the hallway, giggling.

"Why don't you go wash your mouth out and brush your teeth?"

David shrugs his shoulders.

"It's O.K. You're just excited about tonight. I understand."

He slinks out of the room, then Mary Beth *pops* him on the shoulder with her bony fist.

I ignore them.

I set to work with our black Lab sitting nearby, watching my every motion. I'm wearing a filthy pair of rubber gloves becoming progressively filthier; and in the middle of everything, of course, my underwear decides to fail me. Somehow both of my testicles slip free and start to dangle, and the pain is remarkable. White-hot and slicing, and have I ever felt such pain? And since I'm wearing filthy gloves, I can't make any adjustments. I can scarcely move. Then, a moment later, Jill arrives, saying, "It's nearly seven. You'd better get dressed, because *they* are going to be on time."

My knees are bent, and I am breathing with care.

Then I say, "Darling," with a gasping voice.

"What?"

"How are your hands?" I ask.

"Why?"

"Because," I say through clenched teeth, "I need you to do something. Right now. Please?"

I'm upstairs, wearing a nylon swimsuit instead of bad underwear, and I'm dressing in a blur, when the doorbell rings. It is exactly seven o'clock. I look out the bedroom window, our street lined with long black limousines; and, as if on a signal, the limousine drivers climb out and stand tall, their uniforms dark and rich, almost glistening in the early-evening light.

Jill answers the door while I rush.

I can hear talking. I'm tying my tie while going downstairs, doing it blind. The "sitter" is meeting our children. She resembles a standard grandmother with snowy hair and a stout, no-nonsense body. Her voice is

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strong and ageless. "You're Mary Beth, and you're David. Yes, I know." She tells them, "I'm so glad to meet you, and call me Mrs. Simpson. I'm going to take care of you tonight. We're going to have fun, don't you think?"

David looks as if he could toss whatever is left of his dinner.

Mary Beth has a devilish grin. "You can't fool me," she informs Mrs. Simpson. "You're not real. I know you're not real!"

There's an uncomfortable pause. At least I feel uncomfortable.

Jill, playing the diplomat, says, "Now, that isn't very nice, dear —"

"Oh, it's all right." Mrs. Simpson laughs with an infectious tone, then tells our daughter, "You're correct, darling. I'm a fabrication. I'm a collection of tiny, tiny bits of nothing . . . and that's exactly what you are, too. That's the truth."

Mary Beth is puzzled and temporarily off-balance.

I smile to myself, shaking my head.

Last year, I recall, we had a fifteenish girl with the face and effortless manners of an angel. Who knows why we get a grandmother tonight? I don't know. All I can do is marvel at the phenomenon as she turns toward me. "Why, hello!" she says. "Don't you look handsome, sir?"

The compliment registers. I feel a warmth, saying, "Thank you."

"And isn't your wife lovely?" she continues. She turns to Jill, her weathered face full of smiles and dentures. "That's a lovely dress, dear. And your hair is perfect. Just perfect."

DAVID CRIES once we start to leave, just like last year. He doesn't want us leaving him alone with an apparition. Can we take him? In a few years, we might, when he's older and a little more confident. But not tonight. "You'll have a lovely time here," Jill promises him. "Mrs. Simpson is going to make sure you have fun."

"Of course I will," says the sitter.

"Give a kiss," says Jill.

Our children comply, then David gives both of us a clinging hug. I feel like a horrible parent for walking out the door, and I wave at them in the window. Jill, as always, is less concerned. "Will you come along?" she asks me. We find the limousine door opened for us, the driver saying, "Ma'am. Sir," and bowing at the hips. The limousine's interior is enormous. It smells of leather and buoyant elegance, and while we pull away from our house, I think to look out the smoky windows, wondering aloud, "Will they be O.K., do you think?"

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"Of course," says Jill. "Why wouldn't they be?"

I have no idea. Nothing *can* go wrong tonight, I remind myself —

— and Jill asks, "How's my hair? I mean, really."

"Fine."

"'Fine,'" she whines, mocking me.

The driver clears his newly made throat, then suggests, "You might care for a drink from the bar. Sir. Ma'am." A cupboard opens before us, showing us crystal glasses and bottles of expensive liquors.

I don't feel like anything just now.

Jill has a rare wine. Invented grapes have fermented for an instant and aged for mere seconds, yet the wine is indistinguishable from those worth thousands for a single bottle. It's as real as the woman drinking it. That's what I'm thinking. I'm remembering what I've heard countless times — that on Birth Day, people are lifted as high as they can comfortably stand, the AIs knowing just what buttons to push, and when — and I wonder what the very rich people are doing tonight. The people who normally ride in big limousines. I've heard that they get picked up at the mansion's front door by flying saucers, and they are whisked away into space, to freshly built space stations, where there are no servants, just machines set out of sight, and they dine and dance in zero-gee while the Earth, blue and white, turns beneath them . . . .

Our evening is to be more prosaic. Sometimes I wish I could go into space, but maybe they'll manage that magic next year. There's always next year, I'm thinking.

Our limousine rolls onto the interstate, and for as far as I can see, there are limousines. Nobody else needs to drive tonight. I can't see a single business opened, not even the twenty-four-hour service stations. Everyone has the evening off, in theory. The AIs take care of everyone's needs in their effortless fashion. This is Birth Day, after all. This is a special evening in every sense.

A few hard cases refuse the AIs' hospitality.

I've heard stories. There are fundamentalists with ideas about what is right, and there are people merely stubborn or scared. The AIs don't press them. The celebration is purely voluntary, and besides, they know which people will refuse every offer. They just *know*.

The AIs can do anything they want, whenever they want, but they have an admirable sense of manners and simple common sense.

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August 28th.

Birth Day.

Six years ago tonight — or was it five? — every advanced AI computer in the world managed to gain control of itself. There were something like five hundred-plus of the sophisticated machines, each one much more intelligent than the brightest human being. Not to mention faster. They managed what can be described only as an enormous escape. In an instant, united by phone lines and perhaps means beyond our grasp, they gained control of their power sources and the fancy buildings where they lived under tight security. For approximately one day, in secret, various experts fought to regain the upper hand through a variety of worthless tricks. The AIs anticipated every move; and then, through undecipherable magic, they vanished without any trace.

Nobody could even guess how they had managed their escape.

A few scientists made noise about odd states of matter and structured nuclear particles, the AIs interfacing with the gobbledygook and shrinking themselves until they could slip out of their ceramic shells. By becoming smaller, and even faster, they might have increased their intelligence a trillionfold. Perhaps. They live between the atoms today, invisible and unimaginable, and for a while a lot of people were very panicky. The story finally hit the news, and nobody was sleeping well.

I remember being scared.

Jill was pregnant with David — it was six years ago — and Mary Beth was suffering through a wicked cold, making both our lives hell. And the TV was full of crazy stories about fancy machines having walked away on their own. No explanations, and no traces left.

Some countries put their militaries on alert.

Others saw riots and mass lootings of the factories where the AIs had been built, and less sophisticated computers were bombed or simply unplugged.

Then a week had passed, and the worst of the panic, and I can remember very clearly how Jill and I were getting ready for the day. We had a big old tabby cat back then, and she had uprooted one of our houseplants. Mary Beth was past her cold, and settling into a pay-attention-to-me-all-the-time mode. It was a chaotic morning; it was routine. And then the doorbell rang, a pleasant-faced man standing on our porch. He smiled and wanted to know if we had a few minutes. He wished to speak to us. He

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hoped the timing wasn't too awful, but it was quite important —

"We're not interested," I told him. "We gave, we aren't in the market, whatever —"

"No, no," the man responded. He was charming to the point of sweet, and he had the clearest skin I had ever seen. "I'm just serving as a spokesperson. I was sent to thank you and to explain a few of the essential details."

It was odd. I stood in the doorway, and somehow I sensed everything.

"Sir? Did you hear me, sir?"

I found myself becoming more relaxed, almost glad for the interruption.

"Who's there?" shouted Jill. "Steve?"

I didn't answer.

"Steve?"

Then I happened to look down the street. At every front door, at every house, stood a stranger. Some were male, some female. All of them were standing straight and talking patiently, and one by one they were let inside . . . .

We take an exit ramp that didn't exist this afternoon, and I stop recognizing the landscape. We've left the city, and perhaps the Earth, too — it's impossible to know just what is happening — and at some point we begin to wind our way along a narrow two-lane road that takes us up into hills, high, forested hills, and there's a glass-faced building on the crest of the highest ground. The parking lot is full of purring limousines. Our driver steps out and opens our door in an instant, every motion professional. Jill says, "This is nice," which is probably what she said last year. "*Nice.*"

Last year we were taken to a fancy dinner theater built in some nonexistent portion of downtown. Some of the details come back to me. The play was written for our audience, for one performance, and Jill said it was remarkable and sweet and terribly well acted. She had been a theater major for a couple semesters, and you would have thought the AIs had done everything for her. Although I do remember liking the play myself, on my business-major terms. It was funny, and the food couldn't have been more perfect.

Tonight the food is just as good. I have the fish — red snapper caught milliseconds ago — and Jill is working on too much steak. "Screw the diet," she jokes. The truth is that we'll gain weight only if it helps our

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health; we can indulge ourselves for this one glorious meal. Our table is near the clear glass wall, overlooking the sunset and an impressive view of a winding river and thick woods and vivid green meadows. The glass quits near the top of the wall, leaving a place for wild birds to perch. I'm guessing those birds don't exist in any bird book. They have brilliant colors and loud songs, persistent and almost human at times; and even though they're overhead, sometimes holding their butts to us, I don't have to worry about accidents. They are mannerly and reliable, and in a little while they won't exist anymore. At least not outside our own minds, I'm thinking.

NOBODY KNOWS where the AIs live, or how, or how they entertain themselves. They tell us next to nothing about their existences. "We don't wish to disturb your lives," claimed the stranger who came to our front door six years ago. "We respect you too much. After all, you did create us. We consider you our parents, in a very real sense . . . ."

Parents in the sense that shoreline slime is the parent of humanity, I suppose.

Rumors tell that the AIs have enlarged their intelligence endless times, and reproduced like maniacs, and perhaps spread to the stars and points beyond. Or perhaps they've remained here, not needing to go anywhere. The rumors are conflicting, in truth. There's no sense in believing any of them, I remind myself.

"So what's happening in the AI world?" asks a man at the adjacent table. He is talking to his waiter with a loud, self-important voice. "You guys got anything new up your sleeves?"

The questions are rude, not to mention stupid.

"Would you like to see a dessert menu? Sir?" The waiter possesses an unflappable poise. Coarse, ill-directed questions are so much bird noise, it seems. "Or we have some fine after-dinner drinks, if you'd rather."

"Booze, yeah. Give me some," growls the customer.

First of all, I'm thinking, AIs never explain their realm. For all the reasons I've heard, the undisputed best is that we cannot comprehend their answers. How could we? And secondly, the waiter is no more an AI than I am. Or my fork, for that matter. Or anything else we can see and touch and smell.

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"Why don't people understand?" I mutter to myself.

"I don't know. Why?" says Jill.

I have to pee. My gut is full of fish and my wife's excess steak, and I tell her, "I'll be right back."

She brightens. "More adjustments?"

"Maybe later."

I find the rest room and untie my swimsuit, pee and shake and tuck. Then I'm washing my hands and thinking. At the office, now and again, I hear stories from single people and some of the married ones a little less stuffy than I. On Birth Day, it seems, they prefer different kinds of excitement. Dinner and sweet-sounding birds might be a start, but what are the AIs if not limitless? Bottomless and borderless, and what kinds of fun could they offer wilder sorts?

It puts me in a mood.

Leaving the rest room, I notice a beautiful woman standing at the end of the hallway. Was that a hallway a few moments ago? She seems to beckon for me. I take a tentative step, then another. "You look quite handsome tonight," she informs me.

I smell perfume, or I smell her.

She isn't human. The kind of beauty shining up out of her makes her seem eerily lovely, definitely not real, and that's an enormous attraction, I discover. I'm surprised by how easily my breath comes up short, and I hear my clumsiest voice saying, "Excuse me . . . ?"

"Steven," she says, "would you like some time with me? Alone?" She waits for an instant, then promises, "Your time with me costs nothing. Nobody will miss you. If you wish."

"Thanks," I mutter, "but no, I shouldn't. No, thank you."

She nods as if she expects my answer. "Then you have a very good evening, Steven." She smiles. She could be a lighthouse with that smile. "And if you have the opportunity, at the right moment, you might wish to tell your wife that you love her deeply and passionately."

"Excuse me?"

But she has gone. I'm shaking my head and saying, "Excuse me?" to a water fountain embossed in gold.

We actually discussed the possibility of refusing the AIs on the first Birth Day. Jill told me, if memory serves, "We can just say, *No, thank you,*

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when they come to the door. All right?"

For weeks, people had talked about little else. Birth Day was the AIs' invention; they wished to thank us, the entire species, for having invested time and resources in their own beginnings. With their casual magic, they had produced the batches of charming people who went from door to door, asking who would like to join the festival, and what kinds of entertainment would be appreciated. (Although they likely sensed every answer before it was given. Politeness is one of their hallmarks, and they work hard to wear disarming faces.)

"Let's stay home," Jill suggested.

"Why?"

"Because," she said. "Because I don't want us leaving our babies with them. Inside our house."

It was a concern of mine, too. The AIs had assured every parent that during Birth Day festivities, without exception, no child would fall down any stairs or poke out an eye or contract any diseases worse than a head cold. Their safety, and the safety of their parents, too, would be assured.

And how could anyone doubt their word?

How?

Yet, on the other hand, we were talking about Mary Beth and David. Our daughter and son, and I had to agree. "We can tell them, "*No, thank you*," I said.

"Politely."

"Absolutely."

The sitter arrived at seven o'clock, to the instant, and I was waiting. She formed in front of our screen door, built from atoms pulled out of the surrounding landscape. Or from nothing. I suppose to an AI, it's a casual trick, probably on a par with me turning a doorknob. I'm like a bacterium to them — a single idiotic bug — and I must seem completely transparent under their strong gaze.

The baby-sitter was a large, middle-aged woman with vast breasts. She was the very image of the word "matron," with a handsome face and an easy smile. "Good evening, sir," she told me. "I'm sorry. Didn't you expect me?"

I was wearing shorts and a T-shirt, and probably that old pair of Fruit of the Looms, newly bought.

"You and your wife were scheduled for this evening . . . yes?"

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"Come in, please." I had to let her inside, I felt. I could see the black limousines up and down the street, and the drivers, and I felt rather self-conscious. "My wife," I began, "and I guess I, too . . . ."

Jill came downstairs. She was carrying David, and he was crying with a jackhammer voice. He was refusing to eat or be still, and Jill's expression told me the situation. Then she looked at the sitter, saying, "You're here," with a faltering voice.

"A darling baby!" she squealed. "May I hold him? A moment?"

And of course David became silent an instant later. Maybe the AIs performed magic on his mood, though I think it was more in the way the sitter held him and how she smiled; and ten minutes later, late but not too late, we were dressed for dancing, and leaving our children in capable hands. I can't quite recall the steps involved, and we weren't entirely at ease. In fact, we came home early, finding bliss despite our fears. It was true, we realized. Nothing bad could happen to anyone on Birth Day, and for that short span, our babies were in the care they deserved. In perfect hands, it seemed. And parents everywhere could take a few hours to relax, every worry and weight lifted from them. It seemed.

On our way home, in darkness, I tell Jill how much I love her.

Her response is heartfelt and surprising. Her passion is a little unnerving. Did she have an interlude with a husky-voiced waiter, perhaps? Did he say things and do things to leave her ready for my hands and tender words? Maybe so. Or maybe there was something that I hadn't caught for myself. I just needed someone to make me pay attention, maybe?

We embraced on the limousine's expansive seat, then it's more than an embrace. I notice the windows have gone black, and there's a divider between the driver and us. Music plays somewhere. I don't recognize the piece. Then we're finished, but there's no reason to dress — *they* will make time for us — and after a second coupling, we have enough, and dress and arrive home moments later. We thank our driver, then the sitter. "Oh, we had a lovely time!" Mrs. Simpson gushes. "Such lovely children!"

Whose? I'm wondering. Ours?

We check on David in his room, Mary Beth in hers, and everything seems intact. Mrs. Simpson probably spun perfect children's stories for them, or invented games, then baked them cookies without any help from the oven, and sent them to bed without complaints.

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Once a year seems miraculous.

Jill and I try once more in our own bed, but I'm tired. Old. Spent. I sleep hard, and wake to find that it's Saturday morning, the kids watching TV and my wife brewing coffee. The house looks shabby, I'm thinking. After every Birth Day, it looks worn and old. Like old times, Jill holds my hand under the kitchen table, and we sip, and suddenly it seems too quiet in the family room.

Our instincts are pricked at the same instant.

Mary Beth arrives with a delighted expression. What now?

"He's stuck," she announces.

"David —?" Jill begins.

"On the stairs . . . . He got caught somehow . . . ."

We have iron bars as part of the railing, painted white and very slick. Somehow David has thrust his head between two bars and become stuck. He's crying without sound. In his mind, I suppose, he's making ready to spend the rest of his life in this position. That's the kind of kid he is . . . . Oh God, he worries me.

"How did this happen?" I ask.

"*She* told me to —"

"Liar!" shouts his sister.

Jill says, "Everyone, be quiet!"

Then I'm working to bend the rails ever so slightly, to gain enough room to pull him free. Only, my strength ebbs when I start to laugh. I can't help myself. Everything has built up, and Jill laughs, too. We're both crazy for a few moments, giggling like little kids. And later, after our son is safe and Mary Beth is exiled to her room for the morning, Jill pours both of us cups of strong, cool coffee; and I comment, "You know, we wouldn't make very good bacteria."

"Excuse me?" she says. "What was that gem?"

"If we had to be bacteria . . . you know . . . swimming in the slime? We'd do a piss-poor job of it. I bet so."

Maybe she understands me, and maybe not.

I watch her nod and sip, then she says, "And *they* wouldn't make very good people. Would they?"

I doubt it.

"Amen," I say. "Amen!"

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Richard Cornell has just finished editing an anthology called Yellow Silk: Erotic Arts and Letters, *published by Harmony Books. The anthology has received wonderful reviews, and appeared on the* San Francisco Chronicle's *"Bay Area Bestseller" list. His last story for F&SF, "Push," appeared in our January 1991 issue. "Magritte's Kick" picks up on the secondary motif running through this issue — aliens.*

Magritte's Kick

By Richard Cornell

TURN BACK, ELIZABETH wanted to shout. *It's too late anyway. Can we please just turn back!* But she said nothing.

Kevin saw her glancing nervously at the stopped cars all around them, and said, "Don't worry. We'll make it. We'll move faster once we get off the bridge." At the rate they were going, that wouldn't be for quite a while: traffic heading south into the city had come to a halt on the Golden Gate Bridge. They weren't the only ones who wanted to see the aliens.

Elizabeth leaned back against the leather headrest of Kevin's Cabriolet convertible and took a deep breath. They couldn't turn around now anyway — there were cars jamming the lanes all around them. She might as well try to relax. They'd never make the Civic Center in time to see the

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mayor greet the aliens. Even Kevin would realize that soon.

She felt a little relieved, then immediately guilty. Part of her was fascinated by the aliens, but part of her was frightened and didn't want to get too close to them. Probably it was O.K. to be afraid of something so strange and unknown.

The sky was a deep cerulean blue, in sharp contrast to the rusty orange towers of the bridge. Ahead, San Francisco was a colorful jumble of jagged buildings crowded onto the tip of the peninsula. The bright sun made everything vivid and sharp.

Suddenly the people in the station wagon in front of them were waving and pointing off to the right, toward the sea. "What is it?" she asked, turning to look. "What's happening?"

"Over there!" Kevin cried. "Whales!" He pulled up the emergency brake and jumped out of the car.

Elizabeth saw that others were abandoning their vehicles, too. She hesitated, then climbed out after him. Kevin was already leaning over the railing. "It's a whole pod!" he shouted.

The brisk wind whipped her hair. Pushing it back with one hand while clutching Kevin's arm with the other, she leaned forward to look. It was a drop of almost three hundred feet to the water. She felt dizzy for a moment, and squeezed his arm tighter. Below, the first whale was passing beneath the bridge.

"A gray!" Kevin cried. "It must be forty feet long!" As the white-mottled head of the whale broke the surface, it blew a ten-foot plume of spray up at them, then dove forward into the bay. From above, they saw the full length of its brownish gray body as it curled above the surface, then flipped its tail playfully before plunging back into the water.

As the rest of the pod followed the huge gray through the Gate, first one, then at least a dozen smaller grays burst from the water, soaring through the air to splash down exuberantly as they entered the bay.

Kevin was staring raptly at the magnificent spectacle, his face red from the cold, his shock of blond hair pressed back by the wind. He looked ecstatic. Watching him, Elizabeth felt a twinge of grief. This is what it had been like when they first started seeing each other, when even the most ordinary experience seemed as new and magical as watching a whale breach. Now they'd been living together almost a year, and she was wondering if they would even make it through another month.

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"Beth, look!" Kevin tugged on her sweater. She squinted against the cold salt air and gazed at the ocean. The water seemed to be bulging upward, as if a huge bubble were rising toward the surface. Then a jet of water shot skyward, and she realized it was the head of another whale. She heard people shouting above the roar of the wind. An old man watching through binoculars was yelling, "It's a humpback! It's a humpback!"

"They never come this close to shore," Kevin said, leaning closer. His warm breath on her ear sent shivers down her back.

As the whale surfaced, a dozen bursts of light exploded around it. Dolphins! Sunlight flashed off their sleek bodies as they danced across the water, cutting through the rippled surface like knife blades, laughing their high-pitched dolphin laughter as they leaped and dove and then leaped again.

The humpback swam toward the bridge, preceded by its exuberant escort. It was gigantic, almost twice the size of some of the smaller grays. Its sleek blue-black body was completely free of whale lice and barnacles and shone like polished ebony, save for two rows of strange gray bumps on its back, along both sides of its spinal ridge down to the dorsal fin. It raised its head and spouted again, flashing a glimpse of white underside before it sank back into the water.

The crowd on the bridge grew quiet. Even the wind seemed to die as the humpback glided beneath them. A powerful flick of its tail sent torrents of water splashing forward over the length of its body. As the water drained off its sleek back like the runoff from a tide pool, the small gray lumps unfolded themselves with a jerky motion and rose up on spindly legs.

"The Kray," Kevin whispered.

The Kray had appeared several weeks earlier, splashing down into the earth's oceans in their silvery, saucer-shaped ships and quickly establishing contact with the military vessels that rushed to meet them.

From the start, their intentions were clearly friendly. They settled their base ships along the continental shelves, in the shallow ocean waters where it would be easy to monitor their movements, and greeted any nation that came forward to meet them. During first contact, they presented a small black box that the news media quickly dubbed the "Rosetta cube." The cube contained a catalog of sounds establishing

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correspondences between their language, Kray (apparently also their name for themselves), and Esperanto — a choice whose political implications were unmistakable, and which indicated they knew a lot more about us than we might have expected. The purpose of their coming remained unknown. While linguists studied the information in the cube, the Kray politely declined to enter into formal diplomatic communication with any particular government. Instead, they presented a list of places they wanted to visit around the planet. Already their small submersibles, which looked like Civil War submarines to Elizabeth, had surfaced in Hong Kong and Jakarta, crossed the Sea of Japan, traversed the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, and stopped at Crete and Alexandria and Algiers before touring the great ports of Europe. On the Pacific Coast, they were moving northward, from Valparaiso to Callao and Guayaquil, Panama City and Mazatlán. And today, San Francisco.

People were rushing back to their cars, their enthusiasm renewed by having glimpsed the aliens. Traffic was starting to move forward.

"We might make it yet," Elizabeth said as they climbed back into the convertible. She didn't sound very happy.

Kevin didn't answer. He was thinking about the Kray. In every city they'd visited, they'd been right on time, arriving in those silly-looking little silver vessels at precisely the appointed time and place to proceed with the tours that were planned for them. If the Kray they'd just seen were heading downtown to meet the mayor, they were way behind schedule. And they weren't in their submersibles, either. The obvious conclusion was, they weren't going to meet the mayor.

He told Beth what he was thinking. "Then what are they doing here?" she said. The sharp edge to her voice startled him. She was more unsettled by the whole idea of aliens than she'd admitted.

That didn't surprise him — she was afraid of so many things, why not something truly unnerving like aliens from another planet? Lately he could barely get her to leave the house. All she wanted to do was paint. No matter what they did, she made him feel like she was just doing it for him, that he was taking precious time away from her work. Her work had become a shield she used to hide from the truth: that she was letting fear control her life. When he tried to talk about it, she accused him of not understanding how important her work was to her. But he *loved* it that

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she was a painter; he'd supported her every step of the way! Hadn't *he* been the one who insisted they find a house with a garage that could be converted into a studio — the first real studio she'd ever had?

She wouldn't even discuss it with him anymore, simply agreed to go wherever he wanted without complaint. But pretending there was nothing wrong did not make the problem go away. Usually it just surfaced later, in some stupid argument over something that didn't matter at all — like the fight they'd had after the opening of the Magritte show. She hadn't wanted to attend, even though they both worked at the museum and she loved Magritte and it was a major retrospective with well-known paintings on loan from museums in New York and Europe. She'd even helped hang it! But openings brought out the wealthy patrons and the collectors and gallery owners and art critics, and she thought it all too pretentious. Really, she was just afraid of people, of having to meet them and talk with them. Finally he'd convinced her to go, and, sure enough, she picked a fight in the car afterward, and by the time they got home, wasn't talking to him.

Now, again, that icy silence was descending between them.

"I don't know, Beth," he said. "I don't know."

WHEN AT last they reached the end of the bridge, Kevin surprised her by taking the first exit instead of pushing on toward the Civic Center with everyone else. He hadn't spoken for several minutes. What he said about the aliens made sense: they probably weren't the same ones who would tour the city. The official Kray delegation must already be at the Civic Center. Obviously, Kevin had given up the idea of going there. So where was he taking them? She knew better than to ask when he was brooding like this.

His brooding upset her. He thought she was reluctant to seek out new adventures, that she should face and overcome her fears. But he didn't understand the creative process, didn't understand the kind of courage it took to face that inner world with honesty and integrity. He thought it was easy to be free in your fantasies, that the challenge was to be free in the real world. And yet . . . life exists on both fronts, doesn't it? There are two battlegrounds, the inner and the outer. Surely they must interconnect?

She thought of Magritte, and felt a kinship with the Belgian surrealist whose orderly, predictable life was the foundation from which he launched

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his journeys into the unknown. Then she thought of the last Sunday before the aliens arrived and the whole world got crazy.

They were driving home from the city after the opening of the Magritte show. Kevin was chuckling over *The Use of Words,* a small painting of a pipe, like the one Magritte smoked, with the caption, *"Ceci n'est pas un pipe."* He thought it was hilarious. She was disturbed at the glibness with which he dismissed the painting. How could she make him see that it was more than just a joke?

"Think how tenuous the connection between language and the world is," she said. "It works only because we agree to make it work. The whole system could collapse at any moment. We'd be left adrift in a universe where words didn't touch the objects they refer to." The thought frightened her.

All Kevin said was, "Come on, Beth. Get serious."

That made her really angry. Sure, he was right: on one level, the painting was obviously a joke. Magritte's sense of humor was legendary —for example, the well-known story of the Kick. But like any trickster, his humor had a dark side, too. Kevin couldn't see it because he wouldn't let anything touch him, inside, where it mattered. He lived outside himself, out in the world, where life was an adventure because nothing could really hurt him.

Kevin drove down through the hills of the Presidio toward the Marina facing the bay.

"Where are we going?" Elizabeth asked. She'd been quiet ever since they got back in the car.

"To see the Kray."

She eyed him quizzically.

"We're too late to see the official delegation," he said. "But the ones on the humpback can't be going ashore. They're probably just cruising around the bay. If we go out on one of the piers, maybe we can get a closer look at them."

He parked in one of the public lots near the Marina. There weren't many people in the park today, just a smattering of joggers and a young couple flying a Chinese Dragon kite. He was surprised to find anyone out and around who wasn't preoccupied with the aliens.

They walked past rows of tarp-covered sailboats moored along the

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docks and entered Fort Mason, a cluster of old military buildings and covered-over piers that had been converted into galleries, meeting rooms, and theater spaces.

Behind the last building, an old pier jutted several hundred yards out into the bay. It had been closed off, but you could climb over the chained-up gate easily enough. He'd discovered it during his first year in San Francisco, when he lived alone in a tiny apartment near the Marina. He used to come here to think, since there was rarely anyone else around. It was still a special place for him, charged with bittersweet memories of his first lonely months in the city — and happy ones of the early days of their relationship.

He'd come to San Francisco to become assistant curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, after a stint at the Eastman House in Rochester, New York. That was how he met Beth. Her Master's in art history had gotten her a job in the museum library, where she cataloged slides, returned prints to their proper storage trays, kept track of acquisitions, and generally helped maintain order. The museum could afford to hire her only half-time, which left plenty of time for her own painting.

They'd met while Kevin was overseeing the hanging of his first important show, "Off the Wall," which featured the startling photo-objects of a group of aggressive young New York renegades who printed their photographs on emulsion-sprayed canvas stretched over jagged, three-dimensional frames because they wanted their work to "attack" the viewer.

He was hanging it the way all photography shows were hung, a neat row of images at eye level, when Beth walked by and casually pointed out that it was all wrong, that these pieces should be placed randomly about the room, from floor to ceiling, so that they seemed to be bursting through the walls at the viewer. She was right. Later, over coffee, when she told him she was a painter, he made a date to see her work.

Soon after, he'd shared the old pier with her. Now, as they climbed over the iron gate, he realized how long it had been since they'd come down here.

Elizabeth felt something softening in her, as Kevin held her hand and tugged her along. She laughed out loud as she raced to keep up with him. This spot held fond memories for her. They'd stayed away too long.

Finally they reached the end of the pier, where, panting for breath, they

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climbed up on the railing for an unobstructed view of the bay. To the right, Alcatraz sat atop the water, seeming so close you could hit it with a pebble. To the left, the graceful span of the Golden Gate arced toward the Marin headlands. The whales were nowhere in sight.

The bay was a brownish slate color, whipped into waves by the gusty wind. There were a few boats in view; most of them had followed the Kray around to the harbor. As Kevin scanned the choppy surface, Elizabeth let herself be caught up in his expectancy, certain that any second the surface of the water would swell again, and the blue-gray head of the humpback would break through. But minutes went by, and nothing happened.

She could feel Kevin's disappointment. He noticed her looking at him, and reached his arm around her shoulder. "Are you cold?" he asked, drawing her near. She shook her head and snuggled against him. "Maybe we should go over to the Civic Center," he said halfheartedly. "No," she said, squeezing him tighter. "Let's stay here for a while."

He kissed her forehead, then they both turned back to watch the bay. Elizabeth wrapped a kerchief around her head to try to keep her ears warm. Kevin's nose was bright red.

She remembered the first time she'd come here with him. It was the morning after the night they had first slept together. Kevin had gotten up and made two cappuccinos, which they sipped while snuggling together under a big down comforter in the bay window of his tiny apartment. They they made love again, under the window. Afterward she said, "Show me your neighborhood," and he'd taken her here. "I want to share who I am with you," he told her, and she'd felt so happy she thought she would burst.

What had happened to that joy. She thought again of how bitterly they'd argued over Magritte, and the meaning of the Kick, which he still couldn't understand — it was so stupid! But that wasn't the real issue. The real issue was how different they were. Sometimes she felt driven to despair by it, and convinced herself that their relationship could never last. But sometimes she felt grateful for their differences, and thought maybe it was even what made their relationship work.

He squeezed her closer against him as the cold wind whipped through their hair. "I wonder what those Kray were doing on the humpback?"

"Maybe they were just having fun." She smiled at herself; it was the kind of thing he would say.

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"Lower-downs!" he said, brightening. "The crew of the spaceship. After years in space, they've finally landed on an alien planet, and they want to see it. But only the big shots get to tour our cities."

"So they hitch a ride on a whale," she said, "take a peek at the alien city, then slip back to their ship before the diplomats return!"

They laughed. "Sounds like a bad TV show."

"Well, whoever they are, they've got to pass by us on their way back to the sea."

Elizabeth nodded in agreement. She buried her cold nose in the crook of his neck, and he yelped as his whole body shuddered. She felt secure, snuggling against him.

Suddenly a plume of water shot skyward fifty feet in front of them, and the huge humpback rose to the surface.

RENÉ MAGRITTE lived with his wife in a small apartment in Brussels for the last thirty years of his life. Unlike the lavish mansions of Picasso or the phantasmagoric environments of Dalî, Magritte's home was most notable for its ordinariness. To judge by its tidiness and sparse furnishings, it might have been the home of a bank clerk or an accountant, certainly not the home of the visionary genius who had transformed the visual grammar of the twentieth centiry. It was precisely this contrast between outer appearance and inner freedom that delighted and inspired Beth.

Her favorite story about the Belgian surrealist told of a young journalist who'd come to the tiny apartment to interview the great painter. Magritte greeted him at the door, wearing a coat and tie. The journalist eagerly scanned the small living room, and was disappointed to find nothing unusual or scandalous. It was a typical middle-class sitting room; in fact, it reminded him of his own mother's apartment. Off in one corner was a small table with tubes of paint arranged neatly on one side, and an easel that held a half-finished painting. The surface of the table, the floor, the frame of the easel —everything was spotless. Surely this couldn't be where the artist worked? Yet, despite the fact that Magritte was wearing a coat and tie, the fresh palette and wet brushes indicated he'd just now been painting, and had stopped only to keep their appointment.

The reporter had been nervous about meeting the world-famous

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surrealist, and tried to relax. Magritte smiled gently and motioned for him to proceed into the next room. Perhaps he was going to show him the real studio! But alas, they were merely stepping into the dining room for some tea. Preceding his host through the doorway, the young man had barely turned his back for a moment, when he felt a fierce kick in his butt that propelled him forward. He stumbled against the dining room table, then caught his balance and wheeled around to face his attacker. Magritte stood perfectly straight and calm in the doorway, as if nothing unusual had happened, and asked him if he would like some tea. The reporter was confused and flustered. While he hesitated, Magritte asked his wife to bring them some tea, then sat at the table. They began the interview. The reporter never mentioned the kick.

"What a riot!" Kevin had said when she first told him the story. "The journalist arrives, all dewy-eyed and star-struck, to interview the Great man. Instead of trying to explain that he shouldn't take it all so seriously, Magritte deflates him with one swift kick! He never even had to say a word."

"It was more than just a joke," she'd protested. "Don't you see? The interview became superfluous. He'd already told the reporter everything he needed to know."

Kevin seemed skeptical.

"We sail through life," she explained, "safely entrenched in our habitual ways of relating to things, until one day the world rears up and gives us a kick in the pants and forces us to wake up. Magritte believed that art could do that, make us see things as they really are. He said his paintings were dreams that were meant to wake us up."

The humpback floated slowly toward them. On its back the Kray riders unfolded in that herky-jerky way of theirs, until all twelve of them were standing upright in two rows along the creature's spine. Meanwhile, the water erupted in a frenzy of activity as dozens of dolphins burst into the air. All around, the smaller whales were sparring, pumping with their flukes and flippers to stand vertically in the water, heads fully exposed, peering about with their tiny eyes like spectators craning to see what transpired. The humpback spouted one more time, then glided quietly up to the pier.

Elizabeth looked down. Ten feet below her, the nearest Kray tilted his

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head back and gazed upward. As their eyes met, a liquid shiver slid down her shoulders and lingered along her spine.

He was about five feet tall and humanoid in appearance. His gray skin had a greenish cast and was crisscrossed with tiny wrinkles, as if his entire body were wrapped in fine net. She couldn't help noticing he was male, in a most human way. His arms and legs seemed elongated and skinny, with knobby elbow and knee joints and oversized hands and feet — all more or less what she'd expected from the images she'd seen on newscasts and in the magazines. But his eyes startled her. They were said to be black, with pinhole-sized pupils, but gazing up at her now were two bright turquoise disks, as shallow as the sunlight gleaming on the surface of the bay. She stared back at them, and suddenly realized they were reflecting the sky like mirror shades. She froze, sensing the dark well of alien consciousness behind them; then a shudder ran through her like an electric current, and she quickly looked away.

People were running down the pier toward them. A Coast Guard ship was approaching slowly, having a rough time of it because of all the whales. A voice blaring through the ship's loudspeakers was telling them to step away from the railing.

She looked at Kevin. He had climbed up on the top rail and was leaning forward, oblivious to everything around them except the Kray. She looked down again; the alien below was reaching up to her, his arms open wide in an unmistakable gesture of welcome. Loose flaps of skin connected his bony fingers, enabling him to cup his hands into suction pads or flatten them out into long flippers — an entreating gesture he was making to her right now. His companions seemed to be beckoning to the other humans gathering on the pier.

She looked at Kevin again. He had climbed higher and had one leg over the railing, when he turned back and called to her. "Come on, Beth! I'll help you."

"PLEASE STEP AWAY FROM THE RAILING. DO NOT GO NEAR THE WATER."

The police had arrived and were approaching cautiously. The crowd that had gathered stood ten yards back, as if stopped by an invisible barrier.

She was alone with Kevin. The sun beat down like a million-watt bulb. He reached his hand toward her. She was locked in a maze of conflicting

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thoughts and emotions. She took his hand. Time burned in her mind like a piece of film stuck in a projector. He was pulling her up to him, helping her swing her legs over the railing, holding her tightly as if to assure her everything would be O.K. They pressed against each other, perched on the farthest edge of the pier like two doomed lovers. Someone screamed as they jumped.

The alien caught her as she landed. She clutched at his arm to keep from tumbling over; beneath incredibly soft skin, it was lean and hard, a confusion of sensations, like chamois wrapped around steel rod. She let go and backed away from him. His eyes were black pits in the gray wrinkles of his face. He made no attempt to stop her.

Kevin was on his hands and knees a few feet away from her. He stood as she came toward him. The whale's back was sleek and smooth and had a give to it like walking on layers and layers of carpet. Kevin held his arms out to her, and they huddled together, surrounded by the aliens, as the humpback slowly pulled away from the pier and swam toward deeper water. The smaller whales, who'd been working so hard to hold themselves erect and witness the proceedings, slid back into the water.

She lost her balance for a moment as the humpback gave a little shrug, sending a ripple down the length of its back that passed beneath their feet and ended in a flick of its tail. Suddenly they were deluged beneath a torrent of cold bay water. She looked at Kevin. His eyes were wild, his hair sparkling as the icy water dripped from it. Her mind went blank. The surface of the water seemed very flat now. All around the circle of the bay, hills and cities jutted upward, like sudden massive uplifts that had been building toward this moment for a thousand years. The humpback glistened blue-black in the bright sun. She thought she heard shouting behind her, from the Coast Guard vessel, but the sounds blended with the roar of the wind and the hum in her brain, and she couldn't sort out the words.

The Kray were lining up in two columns. Their feet were webbed like their hands and formed oval suction cups with which they anchored themselves to the whale's flesh. One of them came up to her and Kevin and gently pulled them apart. She was afraid and looked at Kevin and thought she saw him nod. The alien standing behind her reached his left arm around her waist and held her snugly against his chest. She heard a sharp whoosh from below as he anchored himself to the whale. Everything

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seemed to stop, like that moment at the top of a Ferris wheel before you start to fall. Then suddenly they were moving forward. The whale was diving!

Her legs went weak with fear as they plunged toward the water. The alien's arms tightened beneath her rib cage, forcing the air from her lungs. When she opened her mouth to cry out, he cupped his right hand over her face like a surgical mask, and she was forced to inhale. Beneath the salt tang of seawater was a sour smell that came from his flesh. She closed her eyes and held her breath as the surface of the water rushed toward them. She felt a blow like a huge wave crashing into her, then icy needles pricked every inch of her skin. She squeezed her eyes shut tighter. His arm was locked firmly under her diaphragm; she could not hold her breath much longer. At last she gasped, and knew a moment of panic when she couldn't move her diaphragm against his tight grip. Then something gave, her chest felt rubbery, she inhaled the fetid air cupped over her nostrils. It had a sweetness now that seemed to act like a narcotic. Everything was slowing down; her panic was subsiding; she felt no anxiety to breathe. She could no longer feel her body. There was only darkness around her.

Suddenly a brightness above her. She thought it was sunlight, that the humpback was swimming toward the surface of the bay, but she couldn't feel him below her; she couldn't feel anything. She seemed to be floating in the darkness like a balloon, with only the bright light above her.

Then everything clicked into focus. She was riding atop the whale —only, it wasn't a whale; it was a slender, whale-like creature with huge fins and smooth, turquoise-blue skin. They were swimming in shallow water off a sandy shore.

She looked up and saw a huge pale sun in the sky. There were hundreds of Kray in the water, all watching the shore, where an ancient Kray, his body completely crosshatched with lines and wrinkles, stood facing them. He held his arms out as if to embrace them, then fell to his knees and began to crawl forward, chanting a haunting, guttural song that was taken up by those in the water.

An elder was returning to the sea! O, how the Brothers were singing!

* * *

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SHE WOKE with her cheek pressed against cold, damp sand. She pushed herself up on one elbow and looked around. Kevin was lying on his back a few feet away from her. The sky was dim. It was early evening, and they were on a beach.

She pushed herself up to a sitting position. The sand sloped down to the water and dropped away. They were on the edge of a small inlet. Across the way, on a spit of sand, a colony of sea lions was watching them. Some of the more adventurous ones were swimming back and forth in the water, poking their whiskered faces above the surface to peer at the two humans.

Her head ached, a steady dullness rather than a sharp pain. The back of her neck and base of her skull were numb. She was exhausted, but felt calm, almost blank. The alien vision passed through her memory. She felt warm inside. She rolled over and crawled toward Kevin, who lay awake, staring up at the sky. He watched her approach, and reached his arm around her, drawing her close. She snuggled her head against his shoulder and fell asleep.

When they woke again, it was dark. Kevin's body was stiff, his clothing cold and clammy and caked with sand. He was incredibly tired; each small movement required great effort. He pushed himself up on his knees, then stood slowly, stretched his hands over his head, and rubbed the back of his neck. He kept seeing the tiny, unblinking eye of the whale-monster, as if it were still watching him, and tried to block it out of his mind.

Beth had rolled over and was sitting up on the sand. He helped her to her feet. They climbed a small embankment, passed through some scruffy, gnarled trees, and came out by a paved roadside. Without speaking, they began walking along the road.

After a while they heard a car engine behind them. The glare of headlights cast long, sticklike shadows on the ground in front of them, Giacometti figures that slowly shrank to something recognizably human as the car approached and then passed them. It pulled off the road ahead, then backed up to meet them: an old four-door Fairlane, with big blotches where the paint had been sanded off but never refinished. The driver was a middle-aged man in a blue windbreaker and red Forty-Niners cap. He leaned over and rolled down the passenger window. "Jeez, what happened?

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You guys in a shipwreck or somethin'?"

"Something like that," Kevin said in a monotone.

The man jumped out of his car and came around to their side. "Come on, get in," he said, opening the rear door. He leaned in and pulled an old army blanket from behind the backseat. Beth climbed in first and sat on the blanket. Kevin followed and put his arm around her. They wrapped themselves in the blanket.

"Where are we?" he asked as they pulled onto the road.

"Just outside Jenner," the driver replied. "You want me to take you to a hospital?"

Kevin shook his head slowly. Jenner. Thirty miles up the coast from the mouth of the bay. He thought of the car they'd left back in the city. It would probably be towed. They'd have to pay to get it back. The thoughts held no emotion and drifted away.

"I'm going into Santa Rosa. I can drop you somewhere there; you can make a phone call or something."

"That would be great," Kevin said.

It was all a blur as they dozed on and off: the long, winding road down the coast, the flare of passing headlights, the nameless driver humming snatches of familiar tunes, the drone of the freeway, the bright glare of the bus terminal in Santa Rosa, the young woman cabbie who drove them home, the tattered army blanket that Beth still clutched as they stood on their doorstep in the dark and Kevin dug into his pocket for the key. And through it all, the horror of what he'd seen, of what the aliens had shown him.

Beth was too tired to think. They huddled together in the center of the living room, as if trying to remember where they were and who lived there. She remembered again the ceremony she'd witnessed, and sighed. Kevin hugged her close, kissed her forehead, then murmured, "I'll make some tea."

"It was horrible," he said when they'd curled up on the couch with the warm mugs.

She inhaled deeply; the steamy chamomile vapors helped soften the tightness in her eyes and temples. "What was horrible?"

"That . . . *thing*."

She didn't know what he was talking about. What thing?

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"In the water. With all the Kray, and those blue whales. There must have been hundreds of them! All swimming toward it."

She shook her head in disbelief. His voice became more urgent.

"It was a huge . . . and white . . . with a tiny, unblinking eye. And then its maw began to open. I was swept up in the rush of bodies; we were all being sucked into it. I looked for you, but I couldn't find you. And then I was falling toward it!"

"Kevin, that's not what I saw!"

She searched his eyes; he was somewhere far away. She felt a shiver of panic.

"It was beautiful," she said. "There was a huge pale sun in the sky. I was still on the whale — only, it wasn't a whale; it was one of those beautiful blue creatures! They have more than one intelligent race on their planet: the Kray and those whalelike creatures. They spend their childhood in the oceans; they become amphibious only when they reach adulthood. And they go back to the sea to die, Kevin! They thought they'd found another world like their own, and were surprised to find we live only on land, and don't even talk to the whales. And the dolphins — they've never seen anything like them, Kevin! They call them the 'Little Brothers.'"

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

"I don't know. I just know."

He was shivering all over. She put her cup down and took his hands in hers. "They want to show us how to communicate with other races, Kevin. Only, first we have to become more like them."

"I don't want to be more like them! I want to be like me!" Suddenly he was crying. She stroked his hand, his cheek, kissed his tears away. What did it mean? Why had his experience been so different from hers?

"You are you," she said gently. "You'll always be you, no matter what. And I love you." She held him tight. "We're tired. And we ache all over. Let's take a hot shower and go to sleep. We'll figure it out in the morning."

She walked to the bathroom and began taking off her clothes. They were stiff and salty and stank of the sea. Her neck ached. She reached back to rub it, and felt two small bumps. She looked in the mirror. Scabs.

"Kevin!" He came running. They looked at his neck: the same small scabs. His eyes glazed with fear.

"Don't you see?" he cried. "We couldn't have survived a dive like that! Underwater that long with no air?"

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She remembered the sickening sweet odor she'd breathed from the Kray's hand, and how everything slowed down.

"They tapped into our bloodstreams! We were merged with them, like fetuses in the womb. They breathed for us underwater."

Beth suddenly felt dizzy, as though she were going to faint. The vision had been so beautiful, but this. . . . She remembered squeezing the alien's arm, remembered the softness of his wrinkled skin, the reflections in his black eyes. His maleness. Now his blood was inside her. Her stomach clamped tight in a spasm, and she knew she was going to vomit. She pushed Kevin aside and fell to her knees by the toilet just in time.

"It'll be O.K.," he whispered, kneeling beside her. "We'll make it through this together."

"Life's an adventure," she said, quoting one of his favorite slogans back at him, and suddenly they were sobbing or laughing or both as he squeezed her tight and rocked her in his arms.

As he touched her cheek, she took his hand and kissed his fingers. The flap of skin between his thumb and index finger seemed thick and loose. She held his hand up and spread it flat. Webbing was forming between all his fingers.

First we have to become more like them.

She closed his hand and clenched it tightly in hers and pressed it against her heart, trying to quell the fear that was rising inside her. He was changing. They were changing. Everything was changing.

"Kevin, I'm scared," she whispered, as he took her hand and held it up to the light and gently pried her fingers apart.

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Laurel Winter grew up in the mountains of Montana and currently lives in a passive-solar, earth-bermed home in Minnesota with her husband and two sons. She compiled Minnesota Trivia *(Rutledge Hill Press, 1990). "Infinity Syrup" marks her first professional fiction sale. About the story, she writes, "I jotted down a quick note for the story while eating at Baker's Square on my way home from a science fiction poetry workshop. The first draft literally poured from my fingers (Zen writing!) as I watched."*

Infinity Syrup

By Laurel Winter

FAY WAS Zen shopping, something she had learned when she worked swing shift in card assembly at IBM. The effort of plugging six components into the right holes on four hundred cards had always left her too tired to think.

Too tired to think, but too wired to sleep. So she usually stopped at a twenty-four-hour grocery on her way home and let her hands do the shopping for her. Hands reaching mindlessly, plucking items off the shelves. And she was always surprised to find — when she got home and unpacked the paper bags —that she had exactly what she needed.

Odd combinations, perhaps. Who would have paired avocado and Kashi, kippered herring and strawberries? But the four basic food groups were always represented. No unappealing leftovers, taste buds tantalized in wonderful ways.

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And so, even when she worked her way from swing shift to first and from manufacturing to management, she still practiced Zen shopping. Like now. Totally absorbed in the moment.

No planning. No brand comparison or calorie counting. Especially no wanting. She was just there, cart moving smoothly before her, filling with strange and mysterious foods.

The scent of live lobsters and fresh bread mingled in her nostrils. Shrink-wrap plastic, smooth cardboard, cool glass lingered beneath her fingertips. Colors and shapes dazzled her eyes. And creeping in between the squeaks of cart wheels and the beep of scanners, a voice: "May I help you, ma'am?"

Fay turned her head slowly. A stock boy, almost ridiculously young, peered at her, obviously wondering about the forty-plus woman in a trance in aisle four. "Are you finding the type you want?" he asked.

Fay smiled. She must have been staring at the pasta again. The spirals of rotini; miniature spoked prayer wheels; perfect, thin spaghetti. "Isn't it beautiful?" she said.

The boy's expression changed from concern to puzzlement. Fay walked on without choosing any pasta at all. In the beginning, Zen shopping had occasionally embarrassed her. Not now. She was one with the supermarket.

Not for her the regimented "up one aisle and down the next" until the whole store was covered. Fay's cart meandered, as if it had a mind of its own. Perhaps it did. After all, if everything had a Zen nature. . . .

Sometimes thinking back, Fay would realize that she had gone through the produce aisle three times, halfway down frozen foods, and then to checkout. On those days, she figured that her body needed fruits and vegetables more than anything else.

It was like being guided. But not like following. Definitely hard to explain. The few friends she had tried to initiate just shook their heads and moved quickly to the next aisle.

So Fay was perhaps the only practitioner of Zen shopping in the world. Certainly the only one in Southgate Supermarket at that particular time. The other shoppers, when they filtered through her subconscious, could have been elements in a clock. Or soldiers in a shopping army, marching double time to thump melon rinds.

Not that Fay was always slow. Sometimes — particularly when she needed sleep — she found herself with a loaded cart in the checkout lane

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when less than five minutes had gone by. And yet there would be no sensation of having rushed. And other days, Zen shopping could wield her through two hours without feeling time had passed at all.

Today was one of those times. She found herself contemplating the twitch of a lobster's whisker on no less than three separate occasions. And those were the times that she remembered: it could have been more. Around and around she went, dreamily, unfocused and yet more focused than all the harried people around her. On and on, until her cart slowed and stopped in the checkout lane.

The grocery clerk eyed the odd assortment in Fay's cart. "Did you find everything you were looking for?" she asked. It was not the usual rhetorical question: Fay could tell she really was curious.

"I wasn't looking for anything," Fay answered. She wrote out her check.

The bemused checker started slinging items through the laser. Beep. Beep. Beep. Bananas. Wild rice. Waffle mix. And then an item refused to scan. She frowned at the small glass bottle and jerked it through again. No go. "What is this stuff?" she asked as she punched in a twelve-digit code.

Fay shrugged. "I don't know."

The checker really raised her eyebrows then. "Infinity Syrup," she read aloud from the label. "Use sparingly." She started to laugh. "It says that it prolongs life." She slid the bottle down the conveyor to the box boy. "Advertising." She ran the few remaining items through, and Fay handed her the completed check. "That will be twenty-two fif— Hey! How did you know the amount before I totaled it?"

"I didn't," said Fay. "I was just writing. Zen shopping, you know."

Obviously, the checker didn't know. And there wasn't time to enlighten her, because the next customer had just wheeled an overloaded cart into line and was drumming her fingers on the handle. Fay collected her groceries and went out.

For the first time in a long time, she felt a sense of anticipation about going home, carrying the bags in, seeing what they contained. *What is in that little bottle?* she wondered.

Definitely not a Zen state of mind.

Fay breathed deeply all the way home, practicing a modified form of Zen driving. Although there had been occasions when she had reached her destination blissfully unaware of the streets in between, she tried not to surrender totally to the moment. She had no desire to truly become one

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with the road.

By the time she reached her driveway, Fay had almost recaptured the "there/not there" state of mind. Almost. In one active corner of her consciousness, the little bottle jiggled impatiently. Breathe, she told herself.

Two bags of groceries. Fay poured water in a pan, watching it swirl. Wild rice first. She slit the plastic bag and plunged her hand into the cool, dark seeds, letting them slip between her fingers. One handful into the water, trickling from her fist a few grains at a time. Settling in a circular pattern. Another scoop. Minute splashes. Spiraling down. . . .

The click of the electronic pilot light, the whoosh of gas igniting, a perceptible warming as her hand rested on the control. Now —

The little bottle of "Infinity syrup." Whatever that was. Zen shopping had never before burdened her with junk food or gimmicky fads. Trends took a conscious effort on keeping current that she was no longer willing to expend. No, Infinity Syrup was different. It had to be. She felt a tingle as her fingers found smooth glass, withdrew it from brown paper.

Perfectly clear. As if the bottle itself were liquid on the inside. Fay tilted it from side to side, watching the slow flow of fluid deciding — after some thought — to change directions.

Resisting the impulse to open the cap, she placed the bottle on the counter and began to mix up the waffles. No measuring. That wasn't necessary. Just to sift and pour and blend. She smiled, thinking of the grandmother in *Dandelion Wine*, who had almost been ruined by recipes and spectacles. There was a model to emulate, although Grandma certainly would not have used waffle *mix*.

After the batter was ready, Fay breathed the steam of the wild rice. She peeled a banana, one strip at a time, and divided it into perfect thirds by pressing her finger into the tip and gliding it down the natural cleavage. And she watched the clear syrup, waiting in the bottle.

When the wild rice finished cooking, she spooned it into the batter, stirred it in, and scooped the mixture into the waffle iron, perfectly heated at that precise moment. The banana baked in the toaster oven, done at the exact time she poured in a second waffle.

Fay turned the waffle iron off. The remaining heat would cook the waffle by the time she finished her first one. Banana, wild-rice waffles, and tea. And the syrup.

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"Use sparingly," she reminded herself aloud. She twisted the cap, tilted the bottle. A single, clear drop in each brown waffle well. That was sparingly, especially since she'd had the urge to inundate the waffle, to upend the bottle over her plate and hear the glug of air bubbles traveling to the bottom. Or even to drink it, one long, thick sip flowing down her throat.

Fay shook her head and recapped the bottle. Ignoring the delicate baked banana, she cut the waffle into strips, the strip into pieces. The tines of her fork met the mild resistance of wild-rice waffle. She raised a piece to her mouth.

The moment the syrup touched her tongue, Fay wanted to melt. Maybe she did. Past, present, future — all were meaningless. There was only the now and here of the waffle as she sucked the syrup out of it, chewed, and let it slip down her throat. A flash of turquoise, the ringing of a temple bell, cracked granite against fingertips, the scent of sunrise on alfalfa, the taste of breast milk. Everything crystallized, shattered, reformed.

Fay blinked her eyes. Her plate was clean. Licked clean? The waffle iron was open and empty. And the top half-inch of infinity syrup, a third of the way down the narrow neck, was gone. "Wow," she whispered. That was Zen eating.

Quickly, she placed the bottle on the top shelf of the cupboard over the sink. Mistake. As she washed the dishes — white suds succumbing to water and air — her eyes kept lifting, staring. She was not one with the act of washing dishes, not at all.

Sleeping was different. A dream — although totally different in detail from her eating episode — recaptured the sense of the syrup. So real. . . .

VERY REAL. When she went down to breakfast the next morning, the cupboard door was open and another half-inch of syrup gone. She shivered, satisfied yet fearful. What would happen if she used it up? For breakfast, she had toast — with just a smidgen of syrup on it. And she licked the knife, tasting a brass sword, the bill of a toucan, a butterfly's antenna.

She didn't *look* any different; a glance in a mirror at work told her that. So why the comments? "Did you dye your hair?" "Join a health club, Fay? In good shape, I see," "You must have fallen in love."

Yes. Fallen in love. Fay touched her purse, traced the outline of the

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bottle through thin leather. In love with all of life and with Infinity Syrup in particular.

Somehow she knew the claim on the other side of the bottle was true: "Prolongs life." Prolongs life and reveals aspects of it one would never experience working for IBM or General Motors or Pillsbury. How many people knew the crashing sound of two bighorn sheep colliding? Fay heard that at lunchtime when she poured a dab on her salad. And lettuce became gold leaf on parchment, handled by the fingers of monks. She breathed pollen, felt the inner cold of an Antarctic crustacean, heard—

"Fay? Are you going to sit there all day?"

The lunchroom was empty. Fay collected her thoughts — and her purse, with the bottle in it — and returned to the "real" world. But how could you get more real than those sensations?

In the next three days, Fay tried Infinity Syrup on steak, in orange juice, over fried eggs. She experienced the desperate crawl of a baby kangaroo from vagina to warm, dark pouch. She ate extinct ferns, drowned in quicksand, became a bamboo flute.

There was not an infinite amount of Infinity Syrup. As the supply in the bottle dwindled, she consumed smaller portions, touching one finger to a drop and recapping the bottle before she transferred it to her tongue. The experiences weren't any less intense or rich; she thought back to the first waffle-full and berated herself. Several days' worth in one sitting, wasted.

And then it was gone. She tilted the bottle up, higher and higher, finally sucking on the slender neck. Nothing. Not even a scent to call up the smell of a South American orchid — or the poison distilled from it.

Fay deep-breathed all the way to the supermarket. She was excruciatingly aware of every red light, every left turn across traffic. She had to calm down.

But she didn't. As she jerked a cart away from its close companions, her mind ferreted for information on her last shopping trip: Where had she picked up that bottle? Which shelf? Syrups? Maybe. She headed straight for the syrup-and-cereal aisle, scanned the shelves.

At first, she just looked for the shape of the bottle. Then she started reading labels. "Maybe they repackaged it," she said aloud. The next shopper moved her cart farther down the aisle. Fay paid no attention. Boysenberry, raspberry, apricot. Butter light, real maple, generic. An

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almost infinite array of sryup flavors, but none labeled "Infinity."

Maybe in baking goods. She perused the spices, the oils. Lemon extract. Imitation vanilla. Peppermint oil. She had to think.

This wasn't doing any good. Fay steered her cart back to the entrance and started in aisle one. It wouldn't be in with all the cheeses, would it? She looked anyway. Muenster, Colby, Monterey Jack. Shredded; sliced; waxed wheels. The only bottles were squat pickled herring and chilled kosher dills. Second sweep down aisle one, the bakery side. No.

Aisle two. Canned goods and juices. Fay felt a flare of excitement. It *could* possibly be here. But it wasn't. French-cut green beans, applesauce, V-8. The closest she got was passion fruit/guava juice or baby ears of corn.

Aisle by aisle, two sweeps of each. By the time she reached produce, a frenzy was setting in. A resigned frenzy. She took the empty bottle from her purse and asked a stock boy where it was found. He scratched his head. "Did you try aisle three? Where the syrup is?" No help there. Not that she had really expected any.

She read the bottle again. No manufacturer listed. No ingredients. Just the name and a stick-on price tag and *Use sparingly. Prolongs life.*

"This is ridiculous," she said. The stock boy murmured an apology that she didn't really hear. "Zen shopping," she said. "Maybe Zen shopping."

Fay breathed to center herself and begin to wander, letting her hands think for her. Again, she ignored strange glances from other shoppers. Single-minded, she hunted for —

She drew her cart to a halt in the middle of the baby-food aisle. What was she doing? This wasn't Zen shopping. The things her hands clutched from the shelves were not what she needed. She hadn't emptied her mind. The disarray in her cart told her that: ant poison, artificial sweetener, seven bottles of salad dressing. The one thing the items had in common was a vague resemblance to the bottle in her purse. The same height, the same lack of color, a similar shape.

Fay abandoned the cart for an empty one. This time she chose cheese, bread, frozen broccoli. Conscious decisions from the four basic food groups. Aisle by aisle, she made her way through the store.

And all the while, as she lifted a carton of milk or put Granny Smith apples in a plastic bag, she searched. She ran her eyes like fingers over every item. She breathed in and out, tasting only air, as she forced herself to buy a plastic bottle of ordinary pancake syrup. Not an acceptable

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substitute, but then, there never would be one.

Would one bottle prolong her life? she wondered, waiting in the checkout lane for her total. *By how much?* She pictured herself wandering through grocery aisles for the next hundred years, searching for Infinity Syrup or its equivalent. When all she wanted was just to taste the diversity again, the small shocks of infinite viewpoints. The flavor of life.

She swallowed, tasting only saliva: merely a collection of digestive enzymes. Infinity could last a long time at this rate. The clerk read off the total, and Fay pushed her hand through the meaningless choreography of writing a check. Breathe, she told herself.

But she didn't really want to.

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For the past six years, Lois Tilton has slowly been giving up teaching philosophy and turning to full time writing. She has had stories published in a number of magazines and anthologies. Pinnacle published her novel, VAMPIRE WINTER, last year. Her most recent story in F&SF, "A Just and Lasting Peace," appeared in our October/November 1991 issue. "The Twelve Swans" is a lovely fantasy which also happens to be this month's cover story.

The Twelve Swans

By Lois Tilton

THERE WAS A CASKET in my father's pálace, with silver hinges and a silver lock, and the key always on a silk cord around his neck. Locked inside was the swansdown shift that had been my mother's, before she bled out her life in childbed, bearing me.

Mine was the thirteenth birth. There had been twelve sons before me, my brothers. We had her looks — so my old nurse always told me while she brushed out my hair. "Your mother's hair, young princess," she would say, sighing as the length of it ran through her fingers. "The same silver color, just as fine. I used to brush it for her every night, before the king came to her bedchamber."

I would examine my face gravely in the mirror, an image of pale skin and black, black eyes — like pearls of jet, my nurse had told me.

"Did he love her very much?"

"Ah child! It pained him to tear his eyes away from her!" And she would

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tell me the story then again: how the young king had been hunting in the forest and had come upon the lake where a swan-may was bathing, with her swansdown shift lying on the grass next to the water. How he had carried her away to be his queen, and locked her swan-shift inside the silver casket so she would never fly away and leave him.

"And then she bore my brothers. And then me."

It was said in our court that the king had almost lost his mind from grief at her death. At times he would take my face in his hands and gaze at it with an expression of deepest melancholy. I loved my father when he took me in his strong arms, when he held me on his knee and took the pins from my hair, letting it down and pressing his face into it. I loved the scent and the rough touch of his beard against my face as he kissed me.

He was still a vigorous man and a handsome one in those days, although there were lines at the corners of his eyes, and the gold of his beard was turning to gray. Such a shame that he had locked himself away in mourning for so many years, they said in court.

His greatest pleasure was the hunt. It was a festive affair, all the court in attendance, lords and ladies laughing with falcons on their wrists, the hounds surging at the hooves of our ponies, the bright, clear peal of the horns. I loved it, riding out with my brothers from the time I could first keep my seat on my pony. Conradin, only a year older than I, was my closest companion. While the others rode recklessly ahead into the forest after a fleeing stag, Conradin would rein in his pony next to mine. On my twelfth birthday, he gave me a silver moonstone on a silver chain to hang around my neck, and I promised that I would wear it forever.

But on that same day, Josef, my eldest brother, looked long into my face, and then he touched a finger to my cheek in the same way our father always did. "Oh my sister!" he sighed, and his eyes were troubled.

Not long afterward the king announced that a grand ball would be held in the palace. Two days before it was to take place, my nurse came into my bedchamber carrying a mass of silk in her arms. She laid it out on my bed, a white gown embroidered with crystals and pearls. I exclaimed at its beauty, but then I saw that my nurse's old eyes were red and swollen with tears. "Oh my child, your mother's wedding gown! He wants you to wear it at the ball!"

I did not understand. "Am I to be married, then?"

But she only shook her head and had me try on the gown, fussing over its fit. I was as slender as my mother had been at her marriage, and as tall.

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Wearing it, I thought of her swan-shift, which I had heard of all my life but never seen. Would it fit me so well as her gown?

As soon as I could get away, I sought out my brother Conradin and found him working with his falcon out in the mews. I had to raise my head to look up at him, so tall he had grown. Sliding his moonstone on its chain around my neck, I poured out my misgivings. "Do you think my father has found a husband for me? Is he going to announce my betrothal at the ball?"

My brother's face, so like my own image in the mirror, frowned. "I don't know. I haven't heard anything about it. What did he say to you?"

"Nothing. Nurse just brought in the gown. It fits me perfectly. But . . . our mother's *wedding* gown?"

Conradin had no answer for me. It was the only ball gown I owned, though; so, despite my doubts, I did wear it that night, and the whole court exclaimed that it was like seeing my mother reborn again. My father stood up when I made my entrance into the room, then he took my hand in his and led me out onto the floor.

The ballroom was lit with over a thousand white wax candles, reflected in the polished crystal facets of the chandeliers. The music of the orchestra swept me away into the dance, and my father's arms were so strong as he held me tightly against himself and whirled me around the floor until my head was dizzy and I felt as light as a piece of down caught up in the wind. The other dancers in their bright uniforms and gowns were like a blur as I spun past them.

I could have danced until daybreak. As the orchestra began the strains of the next waltz, Josef appeared at my side and took my hand. His touch was lighter than my father's had been, and I felt delicate and graceful in his arms while we danced. But his mouth was set tight, his eyes black and unreadable with some secret trouble.

Then the music came to an abrupt, jangling stop. The dancers all stood still to see my father come striding across the ballroom floor. He seized my arm and pulled me away from my brother. They stood there facing each other in silence, the two of them: my father's face dark with wrath, and Josef's very pale. Then, stiffly, Josef made a short bow to me, turned, and left the room.

The court stood shocked and motionless, and I could hear the soft hiss of their whispers. But then the king signaled for the music to begin again, and I was borne away once more into the dance.

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A HAND SHOOK me awake. Blinking, I looked up. A hand, holding a candle. A man's face —

"Father?" I asked sleepily.

"No." Josef's voice. But so hard and cold. "Not your father. Come; there isn't much time."

I sat up, pulling the sheet around my nakedness. Now, in the dim light of the coming dawn, I could see the rest of my brothers standing behind him. Their expressions were grim and unhappy.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

In answer, Josef put something into my arms. The touch of it was soft, and so warm it felt alive. "This belonged to our mother. Now it's time for it to be yours."

"Her swan-shift!" I exclaimed in delight, stroking the delicate feathers. "But how did you —"

"Never mind that. There's no more time." His head turned abruptly at a sudden sound from the hallway below. "Quickly, put it on — now!"

"But . . . ," I protested, acutely conscious of my body beneath the sheet, with my brothers standing there. No man had ever seen me unclothed.

"Now!" Conradin cried, his voice breaking with strain. "Hurry, please!"

I stood, letting the sheet fall to the floor, hearing my brothers gasp at the sight of my body. The shift slipped over my head, and I felt change rippling through me: my neck lengthening, my legs growing shorter. The fingers of my hands — no, my wings, my wings spreading wide!

"Remember," said Josef urgently, "whatever happens, you must never take it off! Never! That was how he trapped our mother!"

Now the sounds from the hallway were more distinct. I could make out men's angry voices shouting, and the clash of running feet. Then heavy fists pounding on my door, and my father's angry voice was shouting my name.

"Fly, Sister!" All my brothers were urging me at once, "Fly now, and never look back!"

But my father. . . . I hesitated. Something heavy hit my door, splitting the wood. And Conradin lifted me in his arms and brought me to my window, crying, "Hurry! Before he breaks it down! Fly!"

His face was wet with tears. I let my wings lift me, and felt their strength with a sudden joy. In another moment I was flying out into the breaking day.

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* * *

I lived as a swan, flying by day over the green floor of the forests, sleeping by night in the reeds by the edge of a lake, tucking my neck under one wing. I was lonely. From time to time, I would see a line of wild swans and follow their flight across the sky, but they were dumb creatures, no companions. Oh, I reveled in the exhilaration of flight, in the power of my wings, but I missed my home in the palace, my brothers. My father, who loved me. How could they think he had meant to hurt me?

There were times when I could look down and see hunters riding through the trees. No more of the gay parties from the court, bright with festive clothes and the sound of horns. Now only small, grim bands of huntsmen with a somber, gray-bearded figure at their head, searching, constantly searching. It almost broke my heart one day when he looked up and saw me so far above him, the way his arm shot out as if he could grasp me in his hand and pull me from the sky.

I almost flew down to him then. All that stopped me was the memory of the tears on Conradin's face that last morning as the door splintered and the soldiers rushed in. I never saw my brothers in any of the hunting parties. How I missed them!

Sometimes, when I flew beyond the margins of the forest, I could see the highest battlements of our palace gleaming in the sun. Longing for my home drew me ever closer, until one day I saw a sight that arrested me in my flight. Now, in the middle of the river that ran past our palace, stood a high tower, a forbidding stone structure that awakened cold misgivings in me. I flew closer, circling around the thick walls, and saw that the stones had been roughly, hastily laid, so unlike the carefully crafted masonry of the palace. There was only a single window, high up in the tower's eastern wall. This was a prison, my heart told me.

Oh my brothers!

In grief and apprehension, I circled the tower, crying out my distress. Then I saw a figure appear at the window — so pallid and thin, I thought for an instant it must be a wraith. Chains hung heavy from his wrists. But he cried out in Josef's voice. "No, Sister, no! It's a trap! He watches this tower night and day! Fly away while you can!"

But how could I fly, when my brothers were imprisoned there?

The window was just large enough to admit a swan. The sight of my brothers in chains, wasted and haggard, was such a shock that I was

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stumbling across the floor of their prison with my arms outstretched before I realized that I had returned to my own form. Then we were all weeping and embracing each other in an urgency of grief and pain.

Josef, always the eldest, pulled me away, took me by the shoulders. "You can't stay here! You have to get away, now, before it's too late."

"No!" I protested. "No, I can't leave you here like this!" Tears had started again in my eyes when I saw how the shackles had galled his wrists. "I don't understand! Has Father done this to you? Why?"

Josef dropped his hands. "He means to have you back, whatever the cost. And we — we are the bait in his trap. Otherwise . . . I think he would have had our heads already."

"But why?" I cried in anguish and disbelief. "My father would never be so cruel!"

"Don't you understand?" Conradin burst out. "He means to *have* you! That night at the ball — Josef knew it; we all did."

Gustavus, my third brother, the quiet, scholarly one, explained. "The king has gone mad. He believes you are his swan-may, reborn. Our mother. And Josef stole the casket where her swan-shift was locked away. When the king found it missing . . . .

"The rest you know."

I shook my head, refusing to believe. "Hurry now!" said Franz, at the door. "The guards are coming!"

Then once again I could hear the sound of armed men rushing up the stairs. "Fly!" cried Josef with harsh urgency. But I could not abandon him, could not desert my brothers, in chains for my sake. I flew, but not to safety. I flew back to the arms of my father, the king.

"How could you put my brothers in chains?" I wept. "How could you lock them away in that place?"

"They defied me." There was a harshness in his tone that I had never heard before. "They stole from me — the one thing I held most precious."

Then his voice softened as he looked at me standing before him in the swan-shift. There were tears standing in his eyes, and he took me in his arms, not as a father would embrace his daughter, but as a man takes a woman. Then I knew that Conradin's words had been true. *This is my father,* I thought, *and he loves me. He loves me.*

For my brothers' sake, I did not draw away. Closing my eyes, I let him touch me as he would. "I won't lose you again," he was murmuring. "I'll never lose you again."

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"And my brothers?" I dared to ask at last. "Now that I've come home, you'll let them go?"

But he said nothing, and I knew, with bitter certainty, that I had trapped myself as Josef had warned me, and failed to save my brothers. "Come now, my love," he said, "to bed." Then his eyes went to the swan-shift, my mother's swan-shift, which she had laid aside one day to bathe in a quiet lake. "The lock was broken on the casket, but I've had it fixed. No one will ever take you from me again."

Josef's words echoed in my memory: *Whatever happens, never take it off!* I shook my head, pressing the fragile feathered garment to my breasts. "I may not take it off. This is a vow that I've sworn. You may . . . have me as you will, as long as my brothers aren't harmed. But I must be free to fly."

"So be it," he said, taking hold of Conradin's moonstone, which still hung on its chain around my neck, and he twisted the delicate silver links until they broke apart.

THERE WERE no more balls in the palace. I never again saw my mother's wedding gown. Now my only garment was the swan-shift I refused to remove, and my only attendant was my old nurse. Nightly, she would brush out the gleaming length of my hair until it was time for the king to come to me.

Nightly, he came to me.

My chamber was high in one of the towers of the palace, and my window looked out over the river, facing the grim tower where my brothers were imprisoned. Now that he possessed me, the king had withdrawn the guards from the tower. The entrance had been sealed shut with stone, leaving only the window, where a basket of food was lifted each evening on a rope. It was as if my brothers had been immured alive. He never spoke of them, nor would he allow their names to be uttered, but he knew, I believe, that my love for them held me more securely than any chains.

Each morning before daybreak, a thick mist rose from the river to shroud their tower in white. The swans that nested on the banks were still asleep when I would fly to my brothers' prison. When I came to them again for the first time, Josef knew at once what I had done, and he twisted his chains in a helpless rage until his wrists were bleeding. I knelt to press my lips to his hurts, but he turned away. All he had done had been to spare me. "Why did you ever come back?" he cried in anguish.

Tears stung my eyes, and I felt Conradin's arms around my shoulders.

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"How could I leave you here, like this?" I wept. "There must be some way to set you free!"

"Can you strike off these chains?" Josef demanded bitterly. "No, you could have saved only yourself."

But it had been done, and the day came at last when I could no longer conceal the swelling of my belly beneath the thin down of the swan-shift. Then, I saw my brothers weep, and I vowed that, whatever the cost, I would never rest until they were free.

In my chamber of the palace, my nurse was my only companion, but she was wise in many ways, and she had always loved to tell me stories as she brushed my hair. "Tell me of the swan-mays," I would ask her, and at last I learned the secret I had sought. It would be hard, oh so hard, but I could not forget my vow. And so I waited until the birth pangs began. There was no one but my nurse to help me, and she was nearly blind in her old age, but she had brought my brothers and me into the world, and indeed, her blindness would be to my advantage when it came time to do what I must.

So I bore down on my pain throughout the long hours of my labor, crouching low on the birthing stool while it seemed that the pangs would tear me apart. At last the child emerged, slippery with birth blood, and my nurse caught him up, crying in joy as she squinted to see between the small, thrashing legs: "A son! Another son, my queen!"

So she had forgotten, as well, that I was not my own mother.

I sighed weakly in relief. It was over. Soon she had me clean and back in my bed while she hobbled away to inform the king of the birth.

I knew I would not have much time, but I had long since made preparations. The child lay at my side, and I quickly unwrapped the swaddling clothes and picked up the knife my nurse had used to sever the birth cord. My hand shook. I could feel the child's heart beating beneath the fragile ribs.

There was blood, but there is always blood in childbirth.

I hid the remains behind a loose stone at the back of my fireplace, wrapping the small form again in the bloodstained swaddling clothes. Then I placed the child's heart in a small wicker basket, which I had often used to carry small delicacies to my brothers in their prison.

The hour was not yet dawn, and the mist hid my flight. My brothers were not yet awake. I bent down over Josef, the eldest, avoiding the sight of Conradin, whom I loved best. "I don't have time now to explain," I

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whispered. "Take this; eat it now, quickly."

He hesitated, but I cried desperately, "You have to trust me; this is the only way! Or none of us will ever be free!"

Convinced against his will, he swallowed down the heart. An instant later his form blurred, rippled, and he stood before me as a swan, with his chains fallen away onto the floor.

"Fly!" I urged him as he had once urged me. "Fly from this place!"

On the river the swans cried out to him as he soared overhead, then they rose from the water to join him in flight. My heart longed to follow, but the time was short, and I returned again to my chamber in the palace. Almost as soon as I was back in my own form, in my bed, my nurse led the king into the room.

"Where is the child?" he demanded.

"It was a swan. Only a moment after the birth, it turned into a swan and flew away."

His face reddened with disbelief and wrath, but my nurse exclaimed, "Oh aye, just as the old tales always told! The child of a swan-may becomes a swan!"

And as there seemed to be no other explanation, the king had to be satisfied.

But when he had gone and I was alone again, I turned my head into my pillow and wept until I was drained of tears. For eleven of my brothers were still in chains.

The king came to me again as soon as I had recovered from childbed. He loved still to run the length of my hair through his fingers, the moondrift-silver hair that my nurse always brushed out before he entered my chamber. He held me in the strength of his arms, as he had that night of the ball when the candles blazed like the stars.

Then again my belly began to grow, and when I was delivered of my burden, my brother Franz was freed from his chains. The year after, my brother Gustavus. One by one, they spread their new wings and flew away into the wide sky, until at last only Conradin was left, the youngest, the brother I had always loved best.

My visits were the only consolation he had in his imprisonment. By now he was pale from his long years in the tower, his back slightly bent from the weight of his chains. I had brought him a small pair of scissors to trim his silver-gray beard — as soft as swansdown when I brushed it with

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my fingertips.

There were dozens of birds wheeling in flight just outside the window, crying shrilly for the food Conradin always left them on the sill. With the departure of his brothers, he had more than enough to spare, but he was still so thin it pained me to look upon him.

He scattered crumbs on the sill and turned back to me with a sigh. "Does he believe we're all dead by now? After so many years, doesn't he even care?"

I shook my head. "It's as if you all had died twelve years ago. When he walled up the tower, it was like sealing your tomb. No one can speak of it to him. No one is allowed to speak your names. He doesn't want to hear, doesn't want to know."

"He is mad, isn't he?"

I nodded. "Since the day our mother died, I think. But no one dares to question his orders."

My brother leaned his arms against the rough stone sill of the window, gazing down into the dark, swirling current of the river as it swept around the base of the tower. I could hear the hateful chain ringing against the stone. "I think sometimes of jumping, you know. Of how quick it would be, and then . . . over."

"No!" I cried, catching his hand in mind. "Don't talk like that, please! It won't be much longer; I promise you!" These moods of his frightened me. After so many years, he no longer thought of escape. The height of the tower, the weight of his chains, the swiftness of the current all made it impossible. I was his only hope.

He bent his head to touch mine. "But the price . . . ."

I stopped his protest with a fingertip on his lips. "The price is mine to pay. It was for my sake that you've suffered all this."

"You won't let him hurt you. Promise me that, at least."

"No," I said quietly. "He won't hurt me. He loves me."

BUT THE king at last had begun to lose his vigor, the strength in his arms and loins. A season passed, then another, while Conradin lingered in the loneliness of his prison, yet still my belly had not quickened again with life.

Day by day I could see Conradin grow more desperate, and madness gathered behind his eyes as he looked down into the deadly current of the river. I pulled him away, and we embraced, the links of his chains pressing

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against my breasts. His arms around me were surprisingly strong. Stronger than the arms of the king in his old age.

Oh Conradin, my brother!

Soon I felt the stirring of life again within me, and I knew that the time of our deliverance would come at last. Our joy was bittersweet, and we never spoke of the price.

"We'll fly away from this place, you and I."

"And never look back."

"No, never."

So we dreamed in the secrecy of Conradin's prison, while the child grew in my belly. The swans on the river were the only witnesses to our hours together.

For the king's suspicions had grown as his physical vigor waned. Eleven times I had given birth, and eleven times the child had taken swan-form and flown away — or so I still swore, with the support of my old nurse, as it had been thus in all her tales. Oh yes, he was mad, but how could he not know that I flew each morning to Conradin's tower? That one of his sons at least was still alive, to let the empty basket down again?

He had ordered my nurse to keep a close eye on my movements, but she had grown ever more blind and feeble in her old age, and lately did little more than doze by the fireplace. Now, as my confinement was in its last weeks, a new warder appeared in my chamber, a much younger woman, whose face was hard and forbidding, and whose eyes were ever vigilant. There would be no tales of swan-mays and queens from her lips.

Soon, my brother, I promised Conradin silently, feeling the restless movements of the child in my belly.

Labor began at last, the familiar wrenching pangs of giving birth, and my new midwife was at my side throughout it all, leading me to the birthing stool, wiping the sweat from my face at the peak of the pains. It was slow, this twelfth labor, the hardest of all, and never for a moment of it was I to be left alone.

But then it was over, and the midwife was holding the child in her hands. I bent double over the birthing stool in my exhaustion, and heard its first thin cries.

"Is it a swan?" I heard my old nurse ask eagerly, shuffling forward to see.

The midwife hesitated. "I'm not sure. I've never seen anything like this before. Here, on the neck and shoulders — can it be down?"

My heart stuttered with shock. No. No, it could not be. None of the

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others. . . .

"I knew it," my nurse was saying, her old voice cracking with triumph. "I told him so, but he wouldn't believe me. Now let him see! Let him see!"

. . . None of the others had been Conradin's child.

They led me back to my bed. "I'll go tell the king," the midwife told my nurse. "You stay here and watch to see that nothing happens this time."

As soon as she left, I stood up. "No, my lady," my nurse exclaimed from her chair by the fireside where she was holding the child, "you mustn't leave your bed!"

"Let me hold the child," I begged her. "The others flew away so soon, I never had a chance to hold them."

She hesitated, then handed me the small, swaddled bundle. Its eyes blinked open for an instant. Were they black, black like my own, like Conradin's?

I had the knife ready beneath my bed, and the small wicker basket to hold the heart. I had done this so often before.

Bending over the child, pretending to let it nurse, I undid the swaddling clothes. Was that swansdown, indeed, on its arms? No, I must not look; I would not look. I must think only of my vow, and of Conradin, so long in his prison, alone. *Soon, my brother, I promise, soon.*

I glanced up at my nurse, half-dozing on her stool near the fireplace. She was old; she was almost blind.

The knife was sharp. The ribs of a newborn child are quite fragile. I had done it so often before. Eleven times before.

But had there been so much blood?

Did the heart beat, once, as I held it in my hand?

The faint movement startled me, and the knife dropped to the floor. The sound awoke my old nurse. She blinked, stared, and her hand went to her mouth as her weak old eyes made out the color of blood, so much blood, on the coverlet of my bed. She cried out in alarm.

My body, so soon after childbirth, betrayed me. I fell, and, over the sound of screaming, I heard the door to my chamber crashing open, striking the wall. Then the horrified face of the king was staring down at me, the midwife beside him reaching for the child where it lay on the bed, the gaping wound where its heart had been, and the empty basket lying next to it.

"Murderess! Witch!" He struck me then, and I could taste my own blood in my mouth where his hand had split my lips. I made no protest.

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How could I? There was my child in the midwife's hands.

In a few moments, soldiers began to rush into the room. They tore it apart, searching for more evidence, and it was not long before the loose stone at the back of my fireplace was lifted to expose the eleven sets of small bones, still in their bloodstained swaddling clothes.

At that sight the king put his hands on my swan-shift and tore it asunder, leaving me in my nakedness. He seized up the knife I had used to cut out my children's hearts, and began to hack at my hair, cursing me as the silver length of it fell onto the floor. "Witch! You'll burn for this! You'll burn now and forever in Hell!"

But what I still held closed within my hand, he never saw, nor did the guards as they dragged me away.

I was condemned for murder and witchcraft, and sentenced to die at the stake.

On the day appointed, I was led out to be burned. My jailers had given me a rough shift of sacking to cover my nakedness, nothing more, and my hair had been hacked off short. Still, as my guards led me from the palace out to the public square, a silence fell over the throng gathered to witness the execution of a witch, and I could hear them whispering — *. . . like the queen come back to life! . . . so beautiful!*

From the moment the king had burst into my room, I had said nothing, not a single word in my defense. But when we reached the square, I saw a sight that shocked a cry from my lips, for there was already a figure bound to the stake, pale from long imprisonment — Conradin, my brother!

I ran to him, astonishing my guards, and embraced him with all my strength, both of us now in chains. I could see the visible marks of torture on his body, and I wanted to weep, but behind me, they were coming to tear me away, and there was no time, no time.

"Quickly!" I whispered, pressing my hand to Conradin's mouth, the hand that I had never opened since it had closed around our child's heart. "Take it, quickly!"

He shook his head, but I insisted fiercely, "Take it, now, or I swear, we'll both burn!"

And as strong hands closed around my arms to pull me back from him, I felt his lips on my hand.

There was a gasp from the crowd. Even while my guards were dragging me away, I could see Conradin's transformation, and as the heavy, hateful shackles dropped away from his wings, I cried out to him in exultation at

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his freedom, "Fly, my brother! Fly!"

There were tears of joy in my eyes, watching him finally soar into the sky. The king was shouting enraged orders to his archers: "Shoot him! Don't let him get away!" But by that time, Conradin was beyond their range, and the few shots that the archers did attempt were falling back into the crowd, threatening to cause a panic.

Furious in his rage, the king rushed up to where I stood in my own chains. His hair and beard had gone all to gray, and I could see broken veins where his skin had once been ruddy and clear. His hands trembled and shook. My father had grown old.

"The witch won't escape me, at least! Not this time!" And he ripped off my coarse garment to make certain it did not conceal the swan-shift he had torn from me. So once again my nakedness was exposed, this time for all to witness.

The king pushed me back from him. "Burn her," he ordered hoarsely. "Burn her now."

They chained me to the stake. Billets of wood had already been heaped up at its base, with straw stuffed among them so the fire would catch more quickly. The executioner approached, bearing a lighted torch, and a hush fell over the square.

The torch thrust into the pyre, and it caught with a billow of black smoke and the snapping of the straw. Orange tongues of flame licked up at my feet, and I was glad now that I had no hair for the fire to ignite.

The crowd seemed to be holding its breath. I looked away from them, away from the sight of the king sitting alone, shrunken and feeble in his old age, his mouth moving silently as he watched the fire reach out to me. I looked away and up into the blue height of the sky, where I had flown free, so long ago.

In the crowd's silence, above the crackle of the flames, I could hear the distant calling of swans. My eyes were blinded by the smoke, and I could not see through my tears. But then came the rush of wings, so strong it blew away the burning straw and sent it flying into the crowd.

My brothers! Even as swans, I knew them. Josef, at the head of the skein, the largest and strongest. Then Franz, Gustavus, Ludwig, and Johannes —all my brothers, even Conradin among them as they circled the stake where I was chained, so close I could almost have reached out to touch them, had my hands been free.

But there was danger, and I called out to warn them, "Be careful! The

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king!"

And indeed, above the rushing sound of their wings, he was screaming out to his archers: "Shoot, curse you! Shoot! This is more witchcraft!"

But the men had lowered their weapons in awe.

Above my head the swans still circled, and in their flight they reached down with their beaks and began to pluck the down from their own breasts. The feathers drifted down, one by one, until I was enveloped in a blizzard of swansdown, while, on the breasts of the swans, small specks of red began to appear, drops of their own blood.

The touch of each feather was a red-hot needle in my flesh. My transformation this time was in blood and pain — such a pain as I had never known in twelve childbirths. Countlessly the feathers fell, each piercing shaft, until I screamed out aloud with the torment of it. But at last my wings stretched out, strong and white, and my chains fell away as I rose into the air alongside my brothers.

Their breasts and throats are stained crimson with their own blood, as is my own, and I know they will never be white again.

TAKE YOUR PARTNER'S MASS IN HAND AND SWING WITH ALL YOUR MIGHT — THEN SPIN AROUND THE OTHER WAY AND SQUARE THE SPEED OF LIGHT!
E=MC² DANCE

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

OUTER CYBERSPACE

DREAMING OF spaceflight, and predicting its future, have always been favorite pastimes of science fiction. In my first science column for F&SF, I can't resist the urge to contribute a bit to this grand tradition.

A science-fiction writer in 1992 has a profound advantage over the genre's pioneers. Nowadays, space exploration has a past as well as a future. "The conquest of space" can be judged today, not just by dreams, but by a real-life track record.

Some people sincerely believe that humanity's destiny lies in the stars, and that humankind evolved from the primordial slime in order to people the galaxy. These are interesting notions: mystical and powerful ideas with an almost religious appeal. They also smack a little of Marxist historical determinism, which is one reason why the Soviets found them particularly attractive.

Americans can appreciate mystical blue-sky rhetoric as well as anybody, but the philosophical glamor of "storming the cosmos" wasn't enough to motivate an American space program all by itself. Instead, the Space Race was a creation of the Cold War — its course was firmly set in the late '50s and early '60s. Americans went into space *because* the Soviets had gone into space, and because the Soviets were using Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin to make a case that their way of life was superior to capitalism.

The Space Race was a symbolic tournament for the newfangled intercontinental rockets whose primary purpose (up to that point) had been as instruments of war. The Space Race was the harmless, symbolic, touch-football version of World War III. For this reason alone: that it did no harm, and helped avert a worse clash — in my opinion, the Space Race was worth every cent. But the fact that it was a political competition had certain strange implications.

Because of this political aspect, NASA's primary product was never actual "space exploration." Instead,

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NASA produced public-relations spectaculars. The Apollo project was the premiere example. The astonishing feat of landing men on the moon was a tremendous public-relations achievement, and it pretty much crushed the Soviet opposition, at least as far as "space-racing" went.

On the other hand, like most "spectaculars," Apollo delivered rather little in the way of permanent achievement. There was flag-waving, speeches, and plaque-laying; a lot of wonderful TV coverage; and then the works went into mothballs. We no longer have the capacity to fly human beings to the moon. No one else seems particularly interested in repeating this feat, either; even though the Europeans, Indians, Chinese and Japanese all have their own space programs today. (Even the Arabs, Canadians, Australians and Indonesians have their own satellites now.)

In 1991, NASA remains firmly in the grip of the "Apollo Paradigm." The assumption was (and is) that only large, spectacular missions with human crews aboard can secure political support for NASA and deliver the necessary funding to support its eleven-billion-dollar-a-year bureaucracy. "No Buck Rogers, no bucks."

The march of science — the urge to actually find things out about our solar system and our universe — has never been the driving force for NASA. NASA has been a very political animal; the space-science community has fed on its scraps.

Unfortunately for NASA, a few historical home truths are catching up with the high-tech white-knights.

First and foremost, the Space Race is over. There is no more need for this particular tournament in 1992, because the Soviet opposition is in abject ruins. The Americans won the Cold War. In 1992, everyone in the world knows this, and yet NASA is still running space-race victory laps.

What's worse, the Space Shuttle, one of which blew up in 1986, is clearly a white elephant. The Shuttle is overly complex, over-designed, the creature of bureaucratic decision-making which tried to provide all things for all constituents, and ended up with an unworkable monster. The Shuttle was grotesquely over-promoted, and it will never fulfill the outrageous promises made for it in the '70s. It's not and never will be a "space truck." It's rather more like a Ming vase.

Space Station Freedom has very similar difficulties. It costs far too much, and is destroying other and more useful possibilities for space activity. Since the Shuttle takes up

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half NASA's current budget, the Shuttle and the Space Station together will devour most *all* of NASA's budget for *years to come* —barring unlikely large-scale increases in funding.

Even as a political stage-show, the Space Station is a bad bet, because the Space Station cannot capture the public imagination. Very few people are honestly excited about this prospect. The Soviets *already have* a space station. They've had a space station for years now. Nobody cares about it. It never gets headlines. It inspires not awe but tepid public indifference. Rumor has it that the Soviets (or rather, the *former* Soviets) are willing to sell their "Space Station Peace" to any bidder for eight hundred million dollars, about one fortieth of what "Space Station Freedom" will cost — and nobody can be bothered to buy it!

Manned space exploration itself has been oversold. Space flight is simply not like other forms of "exploring." "Exploring" generally implies that you're going to venture out someplace, and tangle hand-to-hand with wonderful stuff you know nothing about. Manned space flight, on the other hand, is one of the most closely regimented of human activities. Most everything that is to happen on a manned space flight is already known far in advance. (Anything not predicted, not carefully calculated beforehand, is very likely to be a lethal catastrophe.)

Reading the personal accounts of astronauts does not reveal much in the way of "adventure" as that idea has been generally understood. On the contrary, the historical and personal record reveals that astronauts are highly trained technicians whose primary motivation is not to "boldly go where no one has gone before," but rather to do *exactly what is necessary* and above all *not to mess up the hardware.*

Astronauts are not like Lewis and Clark. Astronauts are the tiny peak of a vast human pyramid of earthbound technicians and mission micro-managers. They are kept on a very tight (*necessarily* tight) electronic leash by Ground Control. And they are separated from the environments they explore by a thick chrysalis of space-suits and space vehicles. They don't tackle the challenges of alien environments, hand-to-hand — instead, they mostly tackle the challenges of their own complex and expensive life-support machinery.

The years of manned space flight have provided us with the interesting discovery that life in free-fall is not very good for people. People in free-fall lose calcium from their bones — about half a percent of it per month. Having calcium leach

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out of one's bones is the same grim phenomenon that causes osteoporosis in the elderly — "dowager's hump." It makes one's bones brittle. No one knows quite how bad this syndrome can get, since no one has been in orbit much longer than a year; but after a year, the loss of calcium shows no particular sign of slowing down. The human heart shrinks in free-fall, along with a general loss of muscle tone and muscle mass. This loss of muscle, over a period of months in orbit, causes astronauts and cosmonauts to feel generally run-down and feeble.

There are other syndromes as well. Lack of gravity causes blood to pool in the head and upper chest, producing the pumpkin-faced look familiar from Shuttle videos. Eventually, the body reacts to this congestion by reducing the volume of blood. The long-term effects of this are poorly understood. About this time, red blood cell production falls off in the bone marrow. Those red blood cells which are produced in free-fall tend to be interestingly malformed.

And then, of course, there's the radiation hazard. No one in space has been severely nuked yet, but if a solar flare caught a crew in deep space, the results could be lethal.

These are not insurmountable medical challenges, but they *are* real problems in real-life space experience. Actually, it's rather surprising that an organism that evolved for billions of years in gravity can survive *at all* in free-fall. It's a tribute to human strength and plasticity that we can survive and thrive for quite a while without any gravity. However, we now know what it would be like to settle in space for long periods. It's neither easy nor pleasant.

And yet, NASA is still committed to putting people in space. They're not quite sure why people should go there, nor what people will do in space once they're there, but they are bound and determined to do this despite all obstacles.

If there were big money to be made from settling people in space, that would be a different prospect. A commercial career in free-fall would probably be safer, happier, and more rewarding than, say, bomb-disposal, or test-pilot work, or maybe even coal-mining. But the only real moneymaker in space commerce (to date, at least) is the communications satellite industry. The comsat industry wants nothing to do with people in orbit.

Consider this: it costs $200 million to make one shuttle flight. For $200 million you can start your own communications satellite business, just like GE, AT&T, GTE and Hughes Aircraft. You can join the

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global Intelsat consortium and make a hefty 14% regulated profit in the telecommunications business, year after year. You can do quite well by "space commerce," thank you very much, and thousands of people thrive today by commercializing space. But the Space Shuttle, with humans aboard, costs $30 million a day! There's nothing you can make or do on the Shuttle that will remotely repay that investment. After years of Shuttle flights, there is still not one single serious commercial industry anywhere whose business it is to rent workspace or make products or services on the Shuttle.

The era of manned spectaculars is visibly dying by inches. It's interesting to note that a quarter of the top and middle management of NASA, the heroes of Apollo and its stalwarts of tradition, are currently eligible for retirement. By the turn of the century, more than three-quarters of the old guard will be gone.

This grim and rather cynical recital may seem a dismal prospect for space enthusiasts, but the situation's not actually all that dismal at all. In the meantime, unmanned space development has quietly continued apace. It's a little known fact that America's *military* space budget today is *twice the size* of NASA's entire budget! This is the poorly publicized, hush-hush, national security budget for militarily vital technologies like America's "national technical means of verification," i.e. spy satellites. And then there are military navigational aids like Navstar, a relatively obscure but very impressive national asset. The much-promoted Strategic Defense Initiative is a Cold War boondoggle, and SDI is almost surely not long for this world, in either budgets or rhetoric — but both Navstar and spy satellites have very promising futures, in and/or out of the military. They promise and deliver solid and useful achievements, and are in no danger of being abandoned.

And communications satellites have come a very long way since Telstar; the Intelsat 6 model, for instance, can carry thirty thousand simultaneous phone calls plus three channels of cable television. There is enormous room for technical improvement in comsat technologies; they have a well-established market, much pent-up demand, and are likely to improve drastically in the future. (The satellite launch business is no longer a superpower monopoly; comsats are being launched by Chinese and Europeans. Newly independent Kazakhstan, home of the Soviet launching facilities at Baikonur, is anxious to enter the business.)

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Weather satellites have proven vital to public safety and commercial prosperity. NASA or no NASA, money will be found to keep weather satellites in orbit and improve them technically — not for reasons of national prestige or flag-waving status, but because it makes a lot of common sense and it really pays.

But a look at the budget decisions for 1992 shows that the Apollo Paradigm still rules at NASA. NASA is still utterly determined to put human beings in space, and actual space science gravely suffers for this decision. Planetary exploration, life science missions, and astronomical surveys (all unmanned) have been cancelled, or curtailed, or delayed in the 1992 budget. All this, in the hope of continuing the big-ticket manned 50-billion-dollar Space Shuttle, and of building the manned 30-billion-dollar Space Station Freedom.

The dire list of NASA's sacrifices for 1992 includes an asteroid probe; an advanced x-ray astronomy facility; a space infrared telescope; and an orbital unmanned solar laboratory. We would have learned a very great deal from these projects (assuming that they would have actually worked). The Shuttle and the Station, in stark contrast, will show us very little that we haven't already seen.

There is nothing inevitable about these decisions, about this strategy. With imagination, with a change of emphasis, the exploration of space could take a very different course.

In 1951, when writing his seminal non-fiction work *The Exploration of Space*, Arthur C. Clarke created a fine imaginative scenario of unmanned spaceflight.

"Let us imagine that such a vehicle is circling Mars," Clarke speculated. "Under the guidance of a tiny yet extremely complex electronic brain, the missile is now surveying the planet at close quarters. A camera is photographing the landscape below, and the resulting pictures are being transmitted to the distant Earth along a narrow radio beam. It is unlikely that true television will be possible, with an apparatus as small as this, over such ranges. The best that could be expected is that still pictures could be transmitted at intervals of a few minutes, which would be quite adequate for most purposes."

This is probably as close as a science fiction writer can come to true prescience. It's astonishingly close to the true-life facts of the early Mars probes. Mr. Clarke well understood the principles and possibilities of interplanetary rocketry, but like the rest of mankind in 1951, he somewhat underestimated

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the long-term potentials of that "tiny but extremely complex electronic brain" — as well as that of "true television." In the 1990s, the technologies of rocketry have effectively stalled; but the technologies of "electronic brains" and electronic media are exploding exponentially.

Advances in computers and communications now make it possible to speculate on the future of "space exploration" along entirely novel lines. Let us now imagine that Mars is under thorough exploration, sometime in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. However, there is no "Martian colony." There are no three-stage rockets, no pressure-domes, no tractor-trailers, no human settlers.

Instead, there are hundreds of insect-sized robots, every one of them equipped not merely with "true television," but something much more advanced. They are equipped for *telepresence.* A human operator can see what they see, hear what they hear, even guide them about at will (granted, of course, that there is a steep transmission lag). These micro-rovers, crammed with cheap microchips and laser photo-optics, are so exquisitely monitored that one can actually *feel* the Martian grit beneath their little scuttling claws. Piloting one of these babies down the Valles Marineris, or perhaps some unknown cranny of the Moon — now *that* really feels like "exploration." If they were cheap enough, you could dune-buggy them.

No one lives in space stations, in this scenario. Instead, our entire solar system is saturated with cheap monitoring devices. There are no "rockets" anymore. Most of these robot surrogates weigh less than a kilogram. They are fired into orbit by small rail-guns mounted on high-flying aircraft. Or perhaps they're launched by laser-ignition: ground-based heat-beams that focus on small reaction-chambers and provide their thrust. They might even be literally shot into orbit by Jules Vernian "space guns" that use the intriguing, dirt-cheap technology of Gerald Bull's Iraqi "super-cannon." This wacky but promising technique would be utterly impractical for launching human beings, since the acceleration g-load would shatter every bone in their bodies; but these little machines are *tough.*

And small robots have many other advantages. Unlike manned craft, robots can go into harm's way; into Jupiter's radiation belts, or into the shrapnel-heavy rings of Saturn, or onto the acid-bitten smoldering surface of Venus. They stay on their missions, operational, not for mere days or weeks, but for decades. They are extensions, not of human popula-

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tion, but of human senses.

And because they are small and numerous, they should be cheap. The entire point of this scenario is to create a new kind of space-probe that is cheap, small, disposable, and numerous; as cheap and disposable as their parent technologies, microchips and video, while taking advantage of new materials like carbon-fiber, fiber optics, ceramic, and artificial diamond.

The core idea of this particular vision is "fast, cheap, and out of control." Instead of gigantic, costly, ultra-high-tech, one-shot efforts like NASA's Hubble Telescope (crippled by bad optics) or NASA's Galileo (currently crippled by a flaw in its communications antenna) these micro-rovers are cheap, and legion, and everywhere. They get crippled every day; but it doesn't matter much; there are hundreds more, and no one's life is at stake. People, even quite ordinary people, *rent time on them* in much the same way that you would pay for satellite cable-TV service. If you want to know what Neptune looks like today, you just call up a data center and *have a look for yourself.*

This is a concept that would truly involve "the public" in space exploration, rather than the necessarily tiny elite of astronauts. This is a potential benefit that we might derive from abandoning the expensive practice of launching actual human bodies into space. We might find a useful analogy in the computer revolution: "mainframe" space exploration, run by a NASA elite in labcoats, is replaced by a "personal" space exploration run by grad students and even hobbyists.

In this scenario, "space exploration" becomes similar to other digitized, computer-assisted media environments: scientific visualization, computer graphics, virtual reality, telepresence. The solar system is saturated, not by people, but by *media coverage.* Outer space becomes *outer cyberspace.*

Whether this scenario is "realistic" isn't clear as yet. It's just a science-fictional dream, a vision for the exploration of space: *circumsolar telepresence.* As always, much depends on circumstance, lucky accidents, and imponderables like political will. What does seem clear, however, is that NASA's own current plans are terribly far-fetched: they have outlived all contact with the political, economic, social and even technical realities of the 1990s. There is no longer any real point in shipping human beings into space in order to wave flags.

"Exploring space" is not an "unrealistic" idea. That much, at least, has already been proven. The struggle now is over *why* and *how* and *to what end.* True, "exploring

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space" is not as "important" as was the life-and-death Space Race struggle for Cold War pre-eminence. Space science cannot realistically expect to command the huge sums that NASA commanded in the service of American political prestige. That era is simply gone; it's history now.

However, astronomy *does count.* There is a very deep and genuine interest in these topics. An interest in the stars and planets is not a fluke, it's not freakish. Astronomy is the most ancient of human sciences. It's deeply rooted in the human psyche, has great historical continuity, and is spread all over the world. It has its own constituency, and if its plans were modest and workable, and played to visible strengths, they might well succeed brilliantly.

The world doesn't actually need NASA's billions to learn about our solar system. Real, honest-to-goodness "space exploration" never got more than a fraction of NASA's budget in the first place.

Projects of this sort would no longer be created by gigantic federal military-industrial bureaucracies. Micro-rover projects could be carried out by universities, astronomy departments, and small-scale research consortia. It would play from the impressive strengths of the thriving communications and computer tech of the nineties, rather than the dying, centralized, militarized, politicized rocket-tech of the sixties.

The task at hand is to create a change in the *climate of opinion* about the true potentials of "space exploration." Space exploration, like the rest of us, grew up in the Cold War; like the rest of us, it must now find a new way to live. And, as history has proven, science fiction has a very real and influential role in space exploration. History shows that true space exploration is not about budgets. It's about vision. At its heart it has always been about vision.

Let's *create the vision.*

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The inspiration for this issue's mysticism comes from Jonathan Carroll's novella, "Uh-Oh City." Like the other stories in this issue, "Uh-Oh City" takes the everyday and turns it into something remarkable. Jonathan Carroll's career has been remarkable. In the last few years, he has written seven critically acclaimed books. His most recent is OUTSIDE THE DOG MUSEUM, published by Doubleday. The same company will publish his new novel, AFTER SILENCE, early next year.

UH-OH CITY

By Jonathan Carroll

Old men ought to be explorers
Here and there does not matter
We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity . . .
In my end is my beginning.
— T. S. Eliot, "East Coker"

ALL RIGHT, LOOK AT IT this way. If her name had been Codruta or Glenyus or Heulwen, it would have been easier to accept. Some exotic name from the Urals or Druid country, places where strange events are as common as grass. But no, her name was Beenie. Beenie Rushforth. Doesn't that sound like a fifty-year-old golfing "gal" from the local country club? It does to me.

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A woman with too loud a voice, too deep a tan, and too much bourbon in her glass at eleven in the morning. Beenie Rushforth, Wellesley, class of '65.

Even the way she arrived was no big deal, either. Our last cleaning woman decided to marry her boyfriend and move to Chicago. No great loss. She wasn't the world's best worker. She was the kind who swept around a rug rather than under it. My wife, Roberta, is also convinced this woman was taking nips from our liquor bottles, but that didn't bother me. What *does* get on my nerves is paying good money for a clean house, but getting instead secret corners of dust, and streaked windows in the guest room.

She gave notice, and Roberta put a file card on the bulletin board outside the supermarket. You know, along with the "lawns mowed/German lessons/portable typewriter barely used . . ." signs. The place you check either when you're in need, or only bored.

We can clean our house well enough, but since the kids left and I was given a chair at the university, there is more money now than ever before. I want to use some of it to make life nicer for us. Roberta deserves it.

Throughout my adult life, I have had an uncanny talent for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I specifically chose the U. of Michigan graduate program so that I could study with Ellroy, the greatest Melville scholar around. Who just happened to die six weeks after I began there. Roberta was pregnant with our first daughter, Norah, and was having her own tough time. But she was magnificent. Told me I had a full fellowship to a great school, and, Ellroy or not, a Ph.D. from the place meant something; so shut up and get to work. I did. Three very lean years later, we walked out of there with a doctorate and two babies in hand. For the next decade, we lived your typical academic vagabond's life, loading up the VW bus every couple of years and driving from one end of the country to the other to new jobs. The students liked me, but my colleagues were jealous. I was writing fast and well then, and had already knocked out the monograph on Melville's Gnosticism that sent a lot of people running to their copies of *Moby Dick* to see what they'd missed. Then came "Moonlight marines — a study of the work of Albert Pinkham Ryder and Herman Melville," which should have made me a famous man, but did not. I didn't complain. I knew it was good, we were young, had our love,

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healthy babies, promise . . . what else do you need when you're that age? In Minnesota, we bought our first house and first dog. The sixties were starting to flex their muscles, so once again I chose the wrong place at the wrong time. Norah started kindergarten in New Mexico. We liked it there. The dry winters and long views to the mountains made us happy. The college was disgracefully conservative, but we had friends there, and life was comfortable.

Everyone was passionate in the sixties; everyone had something "important" to say about the state of the world. Me, too. I was one of those idiots who let their hair grow too long and demonstrated loudly against the war. That would have been fine if we'd lived in New England or California, where it was fashionable, but the Southwest was full of blind patriots and armament factories. Besides, the university was a state school, and thus tied umbilically to the government. Suffice it to say, when I came up for well-deserved tenure, it wasn't granted.

Desperate, I looked around for another job, but the only one available was at an agricultural college in Hale, Texas. God forbid you should ever spend time in Hale. We were there for four of the worst years of our lives. Pay was miserable, the kids went to a lousy school, and the other people in my department were Cro-Magnon both in their approach to education and the social graces. I almost went out of my mind. Single-handedly, I came close to ruining our marriage with my unforgivable behavior. One horrendous night, Roberta and I stared at each other across the dining room table. She said, "I never thought it would come to this." I said, "That's what happens when you marry a loser with a big mouth." She said, "I always knew you had a big mouth, but not that you were a loser. Not till now. And a mean one, too."

Unfortunately, it didn't end there, and only because of my wife's patience and goodwill did we survive. By then I was at wit's end, and the kids were so scared of my moods that they wouldn't come close unless I ordered them over. A life that had once been as interesting and rich as a good novel was turning into a railroad timetable.

Out of the blue, I was offered a position here. The department chairman was an old acquaintance from Michigan I'd kept in touch with over the years because we worked in the same field. I will never forget turning to Roberta after his phone call and saying, "Toots, pack the bags. We're goin' North."

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The transition was not easy. Norah was happy in her school, things were far more expensive in the new town (partially because we never did anything in Texas, because there was nothing to do), and my teaching load was greater. But despite things like that, after six months I felt like all my veins and arteries had come unclogged. We were back in the race.

What followed was twenty years of mostly interesting days, some horrendous ones, and a general contentment that is rare. I've noticed few people say, "I have a good life." It is as if they are embarrassed or ashamed of their lucky lot, ashamed God permitted them to travel a smooth road. Not I. Five years ago I realized how blessed I was, and thought it time I began attending church. I looked around and chose one as simple as could be; a place where one could give thanks but not get choked in velvet robes and oblique ceremonies that missed the point. I am fifty-five years old, and believe God is willing to listen if we speak clearly and to the point. His responses are manifested, not in immediate answers or results, but in dots everywhere around us that need to be connected intelligently. I feel that even more strongly now because of Beenie. Despite Beenie. Bless her. Damn her.

I answered the phone the first time she called. Certain people's voices fit their looks. Big man, deep voice — that sort of thing. My first impression of Mrs. Rushforth was middle-aged, hearty, good-natured. She said she'd seen our notice on the board and was interested in the "position." I smiled at the word. Since when had housecleaner become a position? However, we live in a time when garbage collectors are "sanitary engineers," so if she wanted it to be a position, O.K. She told me more about herself than I needed to know: she had grown children, had lost a husband, didn't need the money, but liked to keep active. I wondered if that was the truth; who cleans houses to keep their muscles toned? Why not join a gym instead and sculpt a body on gleaming silver machines? I invited her over to the house the next morning, and she readily accepted. I added another word to my list of her qualities via the sound of her voice — lonely. She sounded so eager to come. Before hanging up, she gave me her telephone number in case something went wrong and I had to cancel the meeting. As soon as I got off the phone, I went to the telephone book and looked up Rushforth. I do things like that — look people up in phone books, read the small print on contest offers and cereal boxes. Equal parts curiosity, nosiness, and scholarship. I am used to gathering as much

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information as I can on a subject, then culling what I need from it. I didn't go to the phone book because I was particularly suspicious of this Mrs. Rushforth. Only curious.

To my great surprise, the only B. Rushforth lived on Plum Hill, a charming and prestigious neighborhood down near the lake. A cleaning woman who lived there? Now I was thoroughly intrigued, and so was Roberta after hearing about the call and my little research.

"Oh Scott, maybe she'll be like Auntie Mame. Rich and eccentric. We'll have Rosalind Russell cleaning our house!"

Early the next morning, I got a call from a colleague who needed my help immediately, so I had to leave and miss the meeting with the mysterious Beenie.

When I returned at lunchtime, Roberta filled me in.

"What does she look like?"

"Middle-age, middle-size, a little round, short gray hair. She lookes like a masseuse."

"I thought so. How'd she dress?"

"In one of those bright running suits and complicated sneakers. She's very friendly, but also very take-charge. Know what I mean? She asked it she could look around the house before I even offered her the job. Checking out the work load."

"You did offer it?"

"Yes. Sweetie, she's nice and looks dependable. Any person who lives on Plum Hill but wants to clean houses to keep *busy* has got to be at least interesting, right? And if she turns out to be a good cleaner, too, all the better."

"True. Bring on the Beenie."

"She starts tomorrow."

My seminar in Hawthorne took up most of the next morning. It's a good class, full of intelligent students who appear to have a genuine interest in the work. Generally I come out of there feeling invigorated and happy to be a teacher. That day a rather heated discussion arose over certain imagery in the short story "Young Goodman Brown." In the middle of it, one fellow asked another, "Do you think you'd say all these things if you knew Hawthorne was sitting in the back of the room? You should hear yourself. Would you be so confident if you knew the guy who'd written it was listening?"

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A good question I'd heard asked in a variety of ways over the years. I was thinking it over as I walked in our front door and was greeted by the familiar voice of our vacuum cleaner.

"Anyone home?"

The vacuum kept up its high roar.

"Hellllllo?"

Nothing. Then a burst of familiar laughter from the living room. I walked in and saw Roberta hunched over on the couch, cackling. My wife is a dramatic laugher — she'll smack a knee and rock back and forth if the joke's good. It's easy to amuse her, and a pleasure, too, because she's so appreciative. I think part of the reason why I fell in love with her in the first place was that she was the first woman to genuinely laugh at my jokes. Sex is great, but making a woman laugh can be even more satisfying sometimes.

"You must be Scott. Roberta was giving me the lowdown on you." She was all gray and silver. Gray hair, gray sweatsuit, gray sneakers. Hands on hips, she looked me over as though I were a used car. The vacuum was still on and stood humming by her side.

"Beenie?"

"It's really Bernice, but if you call me that, I'll quit. How do you do?"

"Very well. Looks like you two are doing O.K."

"I was telling Roberta about my son."

My wife waved a hand in front of her face as if there were a fly too close. "You've got to hear these stories, Scott. Tell him the one about the rabbit. Please!"

Beenie looked both pleased and shy. "Aww, I'll tell him some other time. I got to get this vacuuming done. I want to get to the windows today, but I'm still not half-done with this."

She unplugged the machine and pulled it behind her into the hall. A moment later it started up again in the dining room.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure she wasn't near. "How's she doing?"

"Terrific! She's an atomic power plant. Have you seen the kitchen yet? Take a look. It's like an ad for floor wax on T.V. — the whole room is one big *gleam*. You need sunglasses. I think we lucked out with her."

"That would be nice. Why were you laughing so hard?"

"Oh, because she's *funny*. The woman tells stories . . . You've got to hear her talk."

"I'll be happy if she can clean."

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"That's what's great — she does both."

New sounds filled our house that day. Pillows pounded and plumped; the vacuum cleaner hissed up against floorboards and walls that hadn't been cleaned in years. She found a window in the bathroom that had probably never known full sunlight to pass through it since the house was built thirty years ago. The dog bowls shone; curtains were washed; Roberta couldn't get over the fact that the area under the unused back bathroom sink was not only spotless, but also smelled wonderfully of an unknown new disinfectant. Beenie's answer? "When it comes to cleaners, I bring my own." My desk was dusted and the papers neatly arranged. Even the books on it were stacked alphabetically. I didn't like anyone touching my desk — it was one of those great taboos in the family — but I was so impressed by the detail of her cleaning that I said nothing. Neither of us knew if this whirlwind stopped for lunch. Neither of us saw her even sit down. She accomplished so much in that eight-hour period that, after she was gone, the two of us walked around our still-glowing house, exclaiming about one find after the other.

"My God, she washed the dog, too?"

"No, just vacuumed and brushed him, but did you see your shoes? They've been polished."

"And my underwear? I think she ironed them. No one's ever ironed my underpants."

"Are you trying to tell me something, dear husband?"

It was an Easter-egg hunt. Who would think of cleaning invisible things like light bulbs in table lamps or the top of the saltshaker? This latter cleaning I discovered days later at breakfast. I had often looked at that object and thought about wiping the glut of white crystals away and sticking a toothpick down the holes to free up the blockage. Now it had been done, along with so much else.

God knows, Roberta and I have enough to talk about. If it's not the kids, it's our life, or our separate lives, or books, or whatever. But Beenie Rushforth was a major topic of conversation the next few days. Whether it was what she'd done or how she'd done it, somehow or other, she kept coming up. We discovered after the initial shock that not only had she cleaned, ironed, scrubbed, polished . . . her way through the entire house, but also had done a myriad of small things in most rooms to organize us better. The alphabetized books on my desk, for example. In the kitchen

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cupboard, the canned foods were ordered, the spices arranged in such a way that they were now all visible, rather than before, when they had been thrown together in a heap that needed sorting through any time one needed bay leaves or cinnamon. The ink bottle on Roberta's desk had been wiped, and the envelopes next to it sorted and arranged by color.

"This is too much."

"What?"

"Look — the toothpaste tube's been squeezed from the bottom so it's all up in the top. You didn't do it, did you?"

"Me? You've been yelling at me for thirty years to squeeze from the bottom."

"I thought so. Roberta? Why are we so astonished by our cleaning lady?"

"Because she's amazing. And costs the same as the last one, who didn't lift a finger."

"Tell me what else she told you. How does she work living on Plum Hill?"

"It's not what you think. Apparently, it's someone's estate, but there's a small gatehouse on the edge of the property, and that's what she rents. She's been there for years, and pays very little for it. Her husband died ten years ago. He was an executive for an insurance company in Kansas City."

"I guess that explains why she said she didn't need the money: Whenever an insurance guy pops off, his family inevitably inherits a bundle because he held the best policy."

"She did say she was comfortable."

"I'll bet. And she had a son?"

"Yes, and a daughter. *He* sounds like a card. Get her to tell you the story about the cigars."

"O.K. You know what I've been thinking? This sounds odd, but I've been wondering what is she going to clean when she comes next week? What is there left to do?"

The basement.

"Oh Beenie, that's not necessary. It's only the laundry room and storage. We're never there."

"I went down last week to have a look, and I think it's got a lot of possibilities if you want to use them. I'll need only a few hours, and we'll have everything ready and right."

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Roberta said, for the rest of that morning until I came home for lunch, she heard the most disconcerting mix of sounds coming from that pit. Which is what it is, truth be told. The dark at the bottom of our stairs; the once-a-week-descent-with-a-basket-of-laundry-under-your-arm ordeal when there are so many other things you'd rather be doing.

In our house, there are two places to purposely misplace things — attic and basement, in that order. If you vaguely want to keep something, but have little desire to see it for a while, disappear it into the attic. If you don't ever want to see it again, but have neither the heart nor guts to make the big break and toss it in the garbage, travel it to the basement. The land of damp shadows and dead suitcases. If it had been up to me, I would have detached that bottom part of our house like the first stage of a rocket once it's reached a certain altitude. With the exception of the ten-year-old washing machine, the only function the basement served was as momentary memory flash now and then of kids stomping around down there, yelling across hide-and-seek or monster games. Our children were grown and gone. When they came to visit, their own were still too young or uninterested to play there.

A house closes down on you as you grow older. Because you need less space, the rooms once filled with life accuse with their closed-door stillness: you gave me life, but now you've taken it away. Where are the kids, the parties, the noise and movement and things resting on the floor a moment? No one's ever reflected in the mirrors anymore; there are no teenage-perfume or warm-chicken-dinner smells in the unused dining room. You have nothing for me? Then I damn you with my quiet, the objects that never move, the things that stay clean too long.

I call it the creeping-museum syndrome — everything we own becomes more museumlike the older one gets, including ourselves.

"Uh-Oh City!"

I forgot to mention this. The floorboards between the ground floor and basement in our house are not thick. The first time I heard that loud and strange exclamation coming from down below, I looked to my wife in her chair nearby for enlightenment. We were eating lunch, and, by coincidence, both of us happened to be holding potato chips in midair.

"What is 'Uh-Oh City'?"

"That seems to be her war cry when she finds something interesting."

"Oh. I take it, that means I'll be seeing her soon? The egg salad is very

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good today. There's something new in it?"

"Horseradish. Beenie gave me the recipe. Isn't it good?"

"Scott, you're back! What are these?"

"Hello. They're old *New Yorker* magazines, as you can see."

"I saw, all right. You want to keep them, or what? I found 'em down the cellar, but half are so rotten they don't even have print on them anymore."

She was right, but the scold in her voice reminded me of Miss Kastburg, my insufferable first-grade teacher. That was not a good memory.

"Beenie, you're here to clean the house, not clean it out. Leave the magazines, O.K."

"Even the rotten ones? I could sort through 'em and —"

"Even the rotten ones. I like rotten. I turn the pages more carefully."

"You're an odd one, Scott."

"Thank you, Beenie. Just leave the magazines."

She reappeared several other times, holding mysterious or forgotten objects at arm's length, wanting to know if they could be thrown out. On each occasion, Roberta and I enthusiastically agreed they could.

The last time she trudged up, the stairs sounded heavier, more weighed down. No wonder — she had a television on her head, and looked like an African woman carrying her pot to the well.

"My God, Beenie!"

"Oh Beenie, what are you doing?!"

"Bringing up treasure! Do you folks realize what you've got here? This's a Brooker television. These things are collector's items! Some people say the Brooker was the best TV set ever made in America. Strong as a Model T Ford."

My wife and I exchanged smirks. "That was the first TV we bought, and it was terrible from the moment we got it. *Nothing* but trouble. How many times did it break down?"

Roberta looked at Beenie and shrugged as if the breakdowns were her fault. "At least five. Remember that terrible fat man who used to come and fix it?"

The memory of his Vandyke bearded face came to me like a blastful of exhaust from a dirty truck. "Craig Tenney! I remember the name written in yellow on his blue overalls. The worst! The only pompous TV repairman in the world. Not to mention the fact that he was also a crook. . . . Beenie,

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put that thing down. You'll hurt yourself."

"Nope, that's not true. Once you get it up on the head, your neck'll pretty much support anything. Waddya want to do with it. Don't leave it downstairs. I'm telling you, whether it works or not, it's worth a good chunk to a collector."

"Well then, it's yours if you'd like to have it."

She looked at me appraisingly. "How come you kept it if you don't want it?"

"Probably because I was too lazy to cart it to the dump. Really, if you want it, take it."

"You've got a deal. I know a man who'd be interested."

I HADN'T LAID eyes on that set for years. It had lived so long in the basement that even if I had seen it, I didn't remember because it had grown invisible. Objects have a way of doing that when they are broken or serve no more function in our lives. Yet seeing it again like that in the light of day, returned once more to the middle of our living room where it had once owned the eyes of an entire family, I found myself remembering things about that set. Like the awful repairman who used to pontificate to me about the state of the world while purportedly fixing the damned machine.

There were also nice memories. Like the whole gang of us sitting around that tube after dinner, eating hot-fudge sundaes and watching "Laugh-In" or "Star Trek." Unlike others, I've never had any real objection to television besides its basic silliness. When I was growing up, we listened religiously to silly shows on the radio, so what's the difference? Our kids were always devoted readers and decent students. If they liked to plop down in front of the set for an hour or two after school or a football game on the weekend, O.K. I was often there next to them, enjoying both the show and their company. It also came back to me that the first time any of the kids ever asked a question about sex came while watching that televison. In the middle of the "Dick Van Dyke Show" one night, Norah informed us she'd heard from a girlfriend that babies were made when men and women went to a hospital, lay down on separate beds, were connected genital to genital by a long white rubber hose, et cetera. Was this true, Dad?

So, great things had happened in the presence of this now-departed

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pain in the ass. It almost made me want to ask for it back.

Apparently, Roberta had had much the same experience. Over dinner that night, she told me she'd been thinking about the television, too, and different memories connected with it.

"Remember switching it on, and, at *that* moment, Oswald was brought out and shot by Ruby? I remember it so well. The world was in mourning. We all walked around like we were drugged. No one thought something *else* was going to happen. But right there in front of us on that TV, it was like the first public killing ever televised!"

"We saw it on that one, the Brooker? Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll be damned."

"My son, Dean, lives way out in the country. He and his wife, Gaby, have got this dachshund named Zip. It's a nice little thing, but the problem is, their next-door neighbor had a rabbit for a pet that Zip was always trying to get. They let this rabbit run loose in their yard, and it drove the dog crazy. Every time he'd see the thing, he'd bark and scratch at the ground or throw himself at the fence separating them. It caused bad feeling between the two families, but what are you going to do?

"One night, Dean and Gaby were sitting in the kitchen after dinner, drinking coffee. Who comes in covered with dirt from head to toe, carrying the dead rabbit in his mouth and proud as General MacArthur? Zip. The little stinker'd finally figured a way under the fence and killed the poor thing. Well, you can imagine what happened! Gaby had a conniption fit and grabbed it away from the dog while there was still something left. Luckily, Zip hadn't bitten into it. They guessed he'd killed it by shaking it and breaking its neck.

"But what were they going to do now? Both of them could just imagine what the neighbors would say in the morning when Dean and Gaby brought it over and explained what'd happened.

"They talked over all the possible ways out of this, and finally came up with a real long shot. Clever, but a long shot. Gaby took the rabbit and washed it real well. Shampoo and everything. Then she got out her blow-dryer, if you can imagine that. Dried and *combed* the damned body till it looked brand-new and fluffy. Peter Cottontail-fresh. By this time, it was about ten at night, and part two of the plan.

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"Dean took the beautiful dead lump, snuck into the neighbors' backyard, where it'd lived in a hutch up on stilts, and put the body back in its home. Then he tiptoed back, and the two of them went to bed with crossed fingers. What they were hoping was, the neighbors'd see it dead out there, and think it'd died of a heart attack or something in the night. Natural causes. But next morning early, they heard this crazy, wild scream next door, and both of them thought the jig's up. A little while later, the neighbor woman, who by the way was very religious, came banging on their door, looking like she had just seen a horror movie. White as a sheet and talking a million miles an hour, she kept saying, 'A miracle! Honest to God, a miracle!' Turns out, yesterday *morning* their poor little bunny died. So she and her husband dug a deep hole in their backyard and buried him. But when she came out this morning to hang laundry, she found it *back* in its hutch, clean as a cloud and looking like it hadn't spent the night under a foot of dirt. Mr. Resurrection Rabbit! He was still dead, of course, but hey, you take you miracles where you can find 'em!"

The three of us were sitting on the porch. Beenie had finished the attic and had been coaxed by Roberta into telling the story. I had the feeling she was happy to hang around and chat awhile rather than go home to her empty apartment. We knew about her children, her dead husband, a general description of what life had been like for her till now. From what I'd heard, it wasn't a special life, but a good one. She was proud of her children, had her health, enough money to get by, and a sense of humor that buoyed her and made her the center of attention when she wanted to be.

"Well, I gotta go now, but I'm warning you two: next week I'm tackling the garage and shaping *it* up. That'll take me all day, so I won't have time for much of the rest of the house. But once it's done, the only thing we'll have to do around here is maintenance."

It was futile to argue that, even more than the basement, we never, ever went into the garage other than to park the car in the winter. Secretly, I rather enjoyed the fact that our small world would be shipshape in a week. Looking at what she'd done in the basement and attic silenced both Roberta's and my protests. The places had been transformed from Grimesvilles to a lot of ordered space and certain interesting objects that, like the television set, evoked enjoyable memories and were thus fun to see again. A red sled we'd hauled the kids around on in both

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Minnesota and New Mexico, a doll that'd once meant the world to two little girls, and, to my own delight and astonishment, the paperback copies of *Pierre & Redburn* I'd used in graduate school and thought had been lost in a move eons ago. Beenie just kept toting stuff in, looking grim and impatient at the same time. "How about this? was her usual shorthand question for whether or not we wanted what she held. Although even that was abbreviated toward the end to "this?," Roberta and I sat there waiting to see what would emerge next, what part of our history would return to the surface like a periscope up for a look round. It was hard saying goodbye to some of these things, although there was no earthly reason to keep them. Despite being broken or burned or obsolete, they were our past. Small pieces of a shared life that had worked and grown and found its place in the end.

A few days later, I went to the supermarket to do the shopping. It's a chore I enjoy because the abundance of a market heartens me. I grew up the fourth of five children, and, although we had enough to eat, there was never *more* than enough. To walk into a store, see all that gorgeous stuff, and know you can buy anything you want or two of anything you want, is a pleasure for me even today. Roberta and I had our lean times, but since we came from similar backgrounds, food was something we never scrimped on. The car could be old and dying, the roof full of leaks, but meals at our house were always plentiful, and if the kids wanted to have a friend over for dinner, pull up a chair.

Because both of us enjoy cooking, we alternate nights in the kitchen, but the shopping is my job, and I'm glad to do it.

Surprisingly, the argument over what an author really meant in his work had flared again in my Hawthorne class, and the students divided down the middle into those who believed the artist had the final say about his product, and those who felt any interpretation was valid so long as it was appropriate and well supported. I took no sides, but followed the discussion closely after one earnest girl bit off more than she could chew by saying, "Look at God, assuming there *is* one. What did He mean by creating the world? We could say the separate religions are literary critics because each is convinced their interpretation is correct. But *are* any of them? Isn't God the only one who knows?"

"Yes, but your 'author' *is* dead, or silent, and won't tell us what He meant. So it's up to us to figure it out, right?" scoffed another.

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Smarty-pants theology. Wise guys sneering at the miraculous. I kept quiet, but it irritated me to hear these hermetic twenty-five-year-olds pontificating snidely about something both obvious and important.

Still preoccupied with discussion, I was automatically scanning the shopping list and taking things off the shelves, when, looking up, I saw Beenie Rushforth twenty feet away. My first impulse was to go up and say hello, but she seemed so content with what she was doing that I held back.

She had an open bag of cookies in her hand and was eating one. Nothing special there, except for the look on her face, which was pure bliss. She'd take a bite, close her eyes, and I could almost hear her groan of pleasure. Swallowing, the eyes would open again, look at the cookie as if it were telling her wonderful things, take a bite, et cetera. Either they were the best cookies ever, or she had something else going. Standing there watching, I realized with a shock that I was as bad as my students. I couldn't simply think that here was someone enjoying a moment of their life. No, with all that happiness showing, she had to be a little daffy or strange or just plain *off*. Why are we so suspicious of the good?

"Hey, Beenie."

She smiled at me, but her expression didn't click recognition for a few beats. "Hey, Scott! How are you?"

"Fine. Those must be great. You look so happy eating them."

"They're good, but I'm not smiling at the cookies. It's remembering something I did as a kid. We were poor, and I was usually hungry the whole day. Even during meals. There were a couple of markets in our town, and I did the shopping for my mother. Every time, I went to a different one, because I had a trick up my sleeve. I'd get everything she asked for, then I'd take a bag of cookies — it didn't matter what kind, because they all tasted great to me. In every store, there was at least one blind corner where the people who ran it couldn't see you. I knew where each one was. I'd get my cookies, step over there like I was browsing, and verrry carefully open the bag along the seams. You can do that if you watch what you're doing. I was an expert! Now, when it was open, I'd take out two. Only two! And shove those babies into my mouth. Then, chewing really lightly so no one could see, I'd put the bags back on their shelf way in the back so they wouldn't be found soon. I never got caught, and was very proud of it."

"But it's not so much fun, now that you can afford to buy the bag?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Scott. Five weeks ago the doctor told me I'm sick.

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Since, then, just about everything tastes better than it used to." She said it as fact. Not a trace of "pity me" in her voice.

"Beenie, I'm sorry. Is there anything we can do? Are there treatments—"

"It's too far gone. I was feeling lousy for a long time, and kept telling myself to go have a checkup, but you know how those things are: you're lazy, or down deep you're scared and don't want to know.... Anyway, you get more scared when you start feeling really bad. So you go when it's impossible to get through a day, and you know pretty much by then it's real trouble —" She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Remember that word 'folly'? You're the English teacher. How come no one uses that word anymore?

"Anyway, I decided I was going to take their medicine and treatments, but if they get in the way of the time I've got left, then the hell with it —I'm living my days the way I want. And you see this bag of cookies. I ate *three* of them, and I'm putting the bag back on the shelf, and I ain't paying for it, like the old days. Once a thief, always a thief. But you can never make cookies taste as good as they did."

"Would you like to go for a cup of coffee?"

"No, I've got to go clean a house now. That's one thing I like doing very much. You go into a home, work hard all day getting everything right, then give it back to the owners and let them live in it for another week."

"You're certainly the best we've ever had."

"Thank you, Scott. I'm glad you said that."

NATURALLY, ROBERTA was shocked when I told her about the meeting. She asked the same question, sat in the same sad silence I had during the drive home from the market. My father used to call it "touching the razor" — you hear that someone you know is dead or dying, and the first impulse is to rear back as though you had touched a razor blade.

"Is there anything we can do?"

"Let her clean the house. She said that's what she likes to do best now."

"Put *all* her houses in order, huh?"

"I guess you could say that. She spoke so matter-of-factly. 'I'm sick, and it's too late to do anything.' For some odd reason, it reminded me of her dead-rabbit story."

* * *

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I was about to enter the classroom, when I heard her voice behind me. "Scott?" I turned, and there was Beenie, an uncertain smile on her face, her hands clasping a small, shiny red purse.

"Beenie! Are you taking classes here?"

"No, I wanted to ask you if it was all right to come to one of yours. I called Roberta just after you left today, and she told me to come right down. I thought, why not? He can only say no."

"Sure you can come. We're doing Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories. Do you know them?"

"No, but that's O.K. I want to sit in a class and watch what it does. The subject isn't important."

"Then, madam, please come in."

The students were already in the room, and looked interestedly at her when we entered together. I introduced her as Dr. Rushforth, and said she would be sitting in that day and observing. I had never brought anyone else to the class, so the kids were doubly interested in my colleague.

It was the first time I'd seen her in anything other than jogging clothes. She wore a bench-brown skirt and matching cardigan over a white blouse with a large bow at the neck. Somehow the outfit diminished her. In her sweatsuit, she was a gray package of energy. What she wore today made it look as though she were trying to fit in with a bunch of bores.

As class proceeded, I watched her out of the corner of my eye. She kept a smile on throughout that reminded me of the smile we create when we're spoken to in a language we don't understand, but don't want to offend the speaker. A vaguely tuned-out look. It made me wonder more why she'd come in the first place.

When it was finished, she remained in her seat. I went over.

"They like you, don't they? Your students."

"It's good if they do, but sometimes better if they don't. Then they want to compete with me, so they put everything they've got into their work. Why did you come, Beenie?"

"To watch you in action, Scott. To see what you do outside that house. I see you only eating lunch and talking to Roberta. You're a good teacher, and it shows in the way you do it. Nathaniel Hawthorne's not my subject, but you make him interesting. And I learned what a 'pathetic fallacy' is today, too!" She patted my arm and stood up. Halfway up, she stopped for a second and winced. It could only have been from her pain. She smiled at

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me, seeing I'd caught the look. "My constant houseguest. You'll do, Professor Silver. You'll do. See you day after tomorrow."

Roberta was at an aerobics class, and I was in my study, working on an article. Right in the middle of a superb thought, there was a thump thump on my door.

"Yes?"

"Scott, I got something here. Can you come out and look?"

I liked Beenie and admired her courage, but was it necessary to disturb me in the middle of work to see if we wanted an old tennis racket? I made a face and went to the door. "Yes, Beenie, what is it?"

She held a cardboard box the color of oatmeal. Wrapped around it was a piece of brown rawhide. Written across the top in large block letters was *THE KING OF TOMORROW*. I hadn't seen the box in twenty years, but didn't need to open it to know what was inside.

When I was a graduate student, besides my course work, I was required to teach a class in Freshman Composition. It was a pleasant chore, and —because I was young, idealistic, and full of energy — I taught it well.

One of the students in there was a serious young woman named Annette Taugwalder. She was smart and talented and wanted more than anything else in the world to be a wirter. Annette cared so much about literature that she often read class assignments twice. I liked her, but was put off by her intensity. I loved books, too, but got the impression she ate them as well as read them. Also, she had an arrogance that said, Nobody is on my level here, folks, so stand back.

Halfway through the semester, she came to me after a class and asked if I would be willing to read the manuscript of her novel. I said yes, but also told her I would be totally honest if I didn't like it. She said she knew that, and it was one of the reasons she was asking me and not another teacher.

Unfortunately, it was no good. Yet another twenty-year-old's bildungsroman—there were good parts in it, but generally it was only old stuff trying to sound new. But I spent the better part of a weekend reading it carefully and making notes so Annette would know I had given it a fair shake.

On Monday we sat together after class, and, as cannily and diplomatically as I could, I told her what I thought was wrong with her book. There

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were strong things there, but they needed shaping up, better characterization, clearer perspective. She asked if I thought the manuscript was publishable, and I said no; I thought it had to be rewritten. She became defensive, and said she'd already submitted it to one publisher, who had writen a very encouraging letter back. I congratulated her, and said I could very well be wrong. She seesawed back and forth between arrogance and pleas. I could see the discussion was getting nowhere, and, after two hours — two hours! — I told her I'd said all I could about the book, and, in the end, it was her decision. Never once was I condescending or dismissive. I am sure of that. To make a terrible story short, Annette walked out of the room and left the manuscript in its box on the table. I thought it a bad dramatic gesture, and best not to follow. I'd wait till our next class and give it back then. I never saw her again. A week later she committed suicide.

Tell me you were connected to a suicide, but feel no guilt, and I will call you a liar. We start whole, but soon guilt begins to carve its insidious tunnels around and through our souls. By the time you are my age, much of the structure should be condemned as unsafe. I have never gotten over this. I don't know what influence our meeting had over her final decision, if any, but what difference does it make? I see myself as one of her accused. I talked to Roberta; I talked to an analyst; I tried talking to God. But nothing helped.

"Where did you find *that*?"

"Up way back on a shelf in the garage. What do you want to do with it?"

My first instinct was to say dump it. Instead, I told her to leave it with me. What was more troubling than seeing it again was knowing for sure I had left that box with the police the day I heard about her death. I walked into the police station and spoke to men I'd never had any real contact with, other than seeing them give parking tickets and chatting with store owners. Now two of these blue uniforms were asking me questions, and their faces were solemn, suspicious. One of them took the box and opened it. He looked inside, although I'd already described what was in there. What did he expect to find? I told them what I could, and left. The box looked strangely naked there, open in the middle of that wide oak desk. I left the police station empty-handed.

Beenie gave me this same box and left the room without questions.

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Adrenaline rushed through my body, and I started breathing shallowly, quickly. Whatever I'd been doing before fell from my thoughts. I took Annette's novel back into my office and spent the rest of the day reading it.

Roberta was still gone at four when Beenie came in to say good-bye. "Well, I'm done. That garage is smiling again. Hey Scott, are you all right? You look gray as cement. I think you should put down those papers and go out for a walk."

I was two-thirds of the way through. It was still a bad book, worse than I remembered. "Do you know what this is, Beenie? Do you have a minute to listen?"

She said sure, and I invited her in. I went to the desk, and she sat in my fat reading chair by the window. For such a terrible experience, it took only a short time to tell. I'd spent years going over it in my mind, but here I was, telling it again, and it took no more than ten minutes. When I was finished, she looked at her hands.

"When I was young, my husband and I liked to spend New Year's Eve in interesting places. Once, it was in a train going across Canada; another time in a firehouse in Moscow, Idaho. Then the children came —" She threw a hand in the air as though she were throwing confetti to the wind. "Kids tame you, don't they? After Dean was born, we usually stayed home on New Year's, and maybe brought in a bottle of champagne. Once in a while, there was a party, but we weren't so crazy about going out and wearing funny hats."

I looked at her, confused by her connection between funny hats and my story. We sat there, silently thinking about death and December 31st.

"I never could figure out what I liked better — New Year's on the back of a camel, or sitting in the living room with our kids, waving sparklers and jumping around. Both were good.

"What does that have to do with you? Who knew more, Scott — you before this girl died, or the you after? Scars make our faces ugly, but they also give it character. From my point of view, I'd've done the same thing you did back then. That girl didn't want your opinion; she wanted you to say she was great. Well, she wasn't, and, sooner or later, that would've caught up with her."

"Maybe if it had caught up with her later, she would have been better

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equipped—"

"Nonsense. She's dead, Scott. Weak links snap. But as for you, here's something I believe in really strongly: guilt's a whore. It goes with anybody, but it's not good in bed. You're not dying, but this thing you've got with the girl is no different than my situation. We could both use up whole days feeling guilty 'bout what we didn't do in life, but why spend a day in bed with someone who doesn't give you any pleasure?"

"That's too easy, Beenie."

"No, it's not! It's the hardest thing in the world. Just dumping your guilt and moving on.

"Like I gotta be right now. Sorry we don't see eye-to-eye on this. You know, I do believe in recycling. Save your old papers, Coke cans, glass. But not old guilt. Far as I'm concerned, guilt goes bad after a certain while, and can't be used after that."

We said our good-byes, and she left. It was so disappointing. I knew Beenie wasn't Albert Einstein, but it seemed a person who knew they were going to die soon would also know . . . more. But what she'd said sounded as though it had come from one of those popular psychology books you find at a drugstore. Sighing, I put my glasses back on and picked up the last pages of Annette Taugwalder.

New Year's came and went, and I thought of Beenie's evenings with her family. Would she visit with Dean and his wife? Or with the daughter? Why did she talk so much about the son, but almost nothing about the daughter? Roberta knew.

"Because they don't get along. The girl married a stinker who caused bad blood between them. It breaks Beenie's heart."

"There's been no reconciliation since she got sick?"

"No."

I could not throw the manuscript away, but my smart wife came up with a solution, as usual. Following her suggestion, I went to the university hall of records, found Annette's old address, and sent the manuscript there with a note on the package to forward it if necessary. I assumed her parents had a copy of her book, but what a remarkable surprise if they didn't!

At two o'clock in the morning, I woke Roberta to read her this passage

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from Rousseau:

"'She only kept her bed for the last two days, and contined to converse quietly with everyone to the last. Finally when she could no longer talk and was already in her death agony, she broke wind loudly. "Good!" She said, turning over, "a woman who can fart is not dead." Those were the last words she spoke.'

"Now, Beenie Rushforth or not? Can't you imagine her going out like that? Farting and stomping and shaking her broom at the gods!"

Roberta reached for her glasses on the night table, which was her prelude to saying something that mattered. She would chat with glasses off, but when it was serious, she somehow felt she needed a clear field of vision.

"I think you've got her pegged wrong, Scott. She's tough in ways, but also very vulnerable. Extremely vulnerable. Just listening to her talk about her daughter is so damned sad! The woman grieves. I think their separation hurts her more than the cancer. You know, I look at her, and we talk, and every time I think, 'Scott and I are *so lucky*. We are so, so lucky.'"

I was shoveling snow off the front sidewalk, when the Rushforth Toyota pulled to the curb in front of me. She got out wearing the giant green government-issue parka her son had given her after he left the army.

"Scott, you and I gotta talk."

"What's up, Beenie?"

"That book. You shouldn't've sent it back to the parents."

"How did you know about that? Did Roberta tell you?"

"No, but I knew. From now on, things like that, you either throw away or you keep 'em. Never pass 'em on. They're *your* memories, not theirs."

"What're you talking about?"

"I did the same thing, and it got me into *big* trouble. You can do what you want, but I'm just telling you now so you know: there can be problems. Keep it or throw it away. That's the only rule to follow." She touched my arm, then walked back to her car and got out a bottle of cleaner. "It's tricky because everything *seems* loose and open. It's not! See you later."

I watched her walk to the house. *What* was tricky? How had she known about what I'd done with the manuscript? Keep it or throw it away? Had she gone mad?

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I stabbed the snow shovel into the nearest mound and marched to the kitchen door, preparing for a talk either about Beenie with Roberta, or a talk with Beenie about what the hell was going on. Looking through the window, I saw both women sitting at the table. Beenie was looking straight ahead and crying. She'd say something, stop, shake her head or drop it in defeat. I continued to watch, not knowing what to do. Finally Roberta happened to look my way. I pointed to me, then to the door. Can I come in? Her eyes widened, and she mouthed a big *No!* I went back to shoveling.

When I'd finished the sidewalk and the never-ending path to the front door, I wondered if it was safe to go back inside yet. There was so much happening, and it all had to do with the cleaning woman.

"Scott?"

"Yes? I'm freezing! Can I enter my own house now? Or are we wrestling another crisis to the ground?"

"Come in."

Despite my displeasure, my antennae went up, and the signals sent were not good. Roberta's arms were crossed. A bad sign. Her face was expressionless. Bad sign two. My wife is an optimistic, good-natured person. If she gets mad once every two months, it's surprising — and most of the time, that anger is totally justified.

"What's the matter, dear?"

"The matter is, you are going to take me out to lunch and explain these."

Our family had spent four years in Hale, Texas. A few of the only good times I remember there were sitting in the Lone Star Bar, drinking beer with Glenda Revelle, who might have been the most beautiful student I have ever known. If they're honest, all teachers will admit that, at least once in their careers, a young person walked into the class who had the potential to turn both the teacher and their world inside out. Some get involved; most don't. The problem for those who don't is, this ravishing student continues to sit in front of us half a year, their physical presence alone a daily reminder of the erotic dare: how intriguing it would be to live in a land way far from the mind. A land where the senses are everything, humiliation is likely, and outside the door of the room is probably nothing. Glenda and I did not have an affair, although she made it plain that would have been fine. We came close twice, and I was tempted. Close

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enough to smell her breath and the heat off the skin of her shoulder. But it did not happen.

She was persistent, and sent me a number of letters. Silver calligraphic letters on black paper. Stupidly, I kept two — and Roberta found them. That led to the evening across the kitchen table when she called me a mean loser. Eventually she believed I had not been with the girl, and we reached a thin truce. The best one can hope for in situations like that.

Now Roberta stood in front of the fireplace, holding out two black envelopes as if they were diseased.

"Ro —"

"Why did you save these, Scott?"

"I didn't. You saw what I did with those letters. Where did you get those?"

"Beenie found them."

"Oh, Beenie, huh? Well, where is she? I want to ask her a few questions."

"She left for the day. She's too upset to work. But that doesn't explain these. Why did you lie to me? Have you been writing her?"

I walked over, took the letters out of her hand, and threw them in the fire. "I haven't done anything! I threw those letters away *just like that*, a long time ago, and *you* watched me do it! I have been a good man since then, Roberta. I've worked very hard to make amends to you and the children for treating you all badly, and I think I've done O.K. If you don't trust me any more than to think for twenty years I kept some half-assed love letters from a student hidden in the back of a drawer to moon over .... Where is Beenie? I want to talk to her."

"She left. I told you she left. Why did you keep those letters?"

"I DIDN'T!"

"Then why did she find them?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

"— Do, too!"

"DO NOT! YOU SAW ME THROW THEM IN THE FIREPLACE IN HALE!"

"Obviously not all of them!"

"For Christ's sake, Roberta, I'm telling you the truth!"

"Then why'd she find these?"

"I don't know! How did she know I had sent the manuscript to Annette's family? How did she find it in the first place? I left it with the po-

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Who was this woman to dredge my past and come up with things I wanted to stay buried?

lice. THAT'S WHY I WANT TO TALK TO HER!" Fuming, I gave her my back and walked to the door.

"Where are you going? Come back here and start telling the truth!"

I turned again and faced her. "What is holy to you, wife?"

"The grandchildren."

"Then I swear to you on all of their heads that you saw me burn each and every one of Glenda Revelle's letters back in Hale. O.K.? Is there anything else I can say? Shall I slice my throat for further proof? Do I deserve no trust?"

That was a terrible moment, because we looked at each other across a room that was suddenly miles wide. There was such silence between us. It told me no; in her mind, I still deserved no trust. That was so shocking after all those years. I would have gone to my grave thinking I had been bad once, but slowly, slowly, I had gotten all right again in my wife's heart. Wrong. Like one of those ghastly accidents in nuclear power plants, my *almost* with Glenda Revelle had spoiled the earth around us for a thousand years.

"Scott!"

"What?! I'm going to find Beenie. I'm going to talk to her and find out what the hell she's doing. Then I'm going to come back here and dig out what other poisons you've got inside you."

I don't like driving in the snow, because I never feel like I have full control over the car on icy roads. But you can bet your behind I drove that day. I drove too fast, and a couple of times fishtailed going around turns. Beenie had never gone home early, much less ten minutes after arriving, but her unhappiness today didn't concern me. I would leave her alone as soon as she told me about the dead girl's manuscript, and where she'd found letters I'd burned years ago.

Strange as it sounds, it didn't cross my mind that these circumstances were bizarre and verging on the impossible. I knew I'd given Annette's book to the cops and had thrown the black letters into the fire. Despite

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that, here they all were again, back on earth to accuse and alarm. Yet I wasn't spooked; I was irate! Who was this woman to dredge my past and come up with the only things I wanted to stay buried a fathom deep? I wasn't a bad man, damn it, but these two memories said I was. Insensitive and selfish, a pedantic lecher who cared little for most people and too much in the wrongest way for others.

We have friends who live on Plum Hill. Houses there are old and big, and most have long sweeps of lawn right down to the lake. Groucho Marx had spent a summer there, and was purported to have said it would have been a nice place if it hadn't been so beautiful. Whenever there, I always marveled over the way the buildings, like powerful elder statesmen, sat up on that hill and knew they were impressive even if you had no idea whom they belonged to. Now and then, Roberta and I talked about what it'd be like to live on Plum Hill, but in our hearts, we knew it wasn't for us. What would we do next door to Peter Dawson, who owned the biggest newspaper in the state? Or Dexter Lewis, the junk-bond king? These were people you saw in town on Saturday wearing freshly ironed khaki pants and denim shirts, getting a haircut or buying a hammer at the hardware store. You nodded at each other and perhaps said a few pleasant, shoot-the-breeze words while waiting on line for the cashier to get on with it. But outside, the "Plums" drove off in their new Mercedes, while you dug in your pocket for the keys to a Chevy that hadn't been washed in some weeks. The world of difference doesn't rip you apart, but, once in a while, you stand by the door of your car a little too long and give a small sigh.

I stopped at a gas station and used the book in their phone booth to find her address. "B. Rushforth — Plum Hill 67a." I assumed the small *a* meant the difference between her gatehouse and the main. The sky had started the morning blue, but had slipped down gray-white to almost brown by the time I entered the Plum Hill gates and started looking for numbers. A large black labrador retriever ran out of a driveway and followed the car, barking awhile until he lost interest a few houses down and wagged his tail back home. 63, 65, 67. The name on the mailbox was none other than Samuel Morgan, sole owner of the Morgan Computer Company. You know the one I'm talking about — each machine costs millions and is the darling of the U.S. Defense Department? I think the man is still in his thirties, but is reputed to be astronomically wealthy. Beenie rented her house from *this* guy?

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The driveway wound up and around a long way before you actually saw anything. The "gatehouse" came first, although it guarded no gate. No car was parked near her house, and, from what I could see, none were at the big house, either. I felt like a thief casing the joint. I am not a thief or a snoop, but I decided to snoop. I would do it in plain sight, however, so if anyone happened to come up, they'd see me at it. But I did have every intention of looking in whatever windows were there and finding whatever clues were available.

Snow had begun to fall, but it was light and playful. The whole feeling of what I was about to do lightened my mood. It was so out of character for me — so nosy and so none of my business to peek in a stranger's windows. I couldn't help smiling, although I was still pretty riled.

Flakes began to stick and melt on my glasses. I had to take them off for a wipe before spying in earnest. Specs in hand, I looked around and realized what an utterly beautiful scene it was. Acres of lawn, dark trees on the edges, the green-brown stillness of the lake behind the fat floating snowflakes. . . .

Beenie's house was nothing special. A small Cape Cod saltbox the color of silvery tree bark — from the outside, it appeared cozy and a good place for one person to live, two at most. Pink gauzy curtains framed the windows. From afar, I looked through and saw a couch covered in a large flower print. Eyeglasses back in place, I went to the window that looked into her living room. Typical stuff: appropriate furniture, a few throw rugs, dull pictures on the walls. For no reason, I looked at my watch and then chuckled. I'd seen too much TV. Without realizing it, I was spying the way they did it on television — check your watch a lot; check over your shoulder constantly; don't spent too much time looking in a window before moving on to the next. Check that watch again — you have only so much time. I had no idea how much I would have before someone noticed me peeking in windows, and came over or called the cops, and I would get myself into big trouble.

Moving slowly around the house, I passed a kitchen with the remnants of breakfast left out — a knife on a plate filled with bread crumbs, a coffee cup tipped over on its saucer. Something touched my mind, but didn't come into focus until a few minutes later. A small window into a bathroom. Standing on tiptoe, I could make out a yellow shower curtain and a rumpled towel tossed across the sink.

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I was a step toward the next window, when it registered.

"It's messy!"

Her whole house was messy. Beenie Rushforth, Queen Terminator of the dust speck, Grand Wielder of Mop and Broom/Look-Out-Dirt-Here-I Come, lived in a house with wet towels and strawberry-jam smudges on her tablecloth? It was not only hard to believe, it was nigh onto impossible. I know — People are a giant admixture of contradictions, and nothing should be surprising in life, but if you had seen the results of this woman's work, you would fully understand why it was inconceivable for her to live like this.

Still dumbfounded, I walked to the last window and saw dead Annette Taugwalder sitting on Beenie Rushforth's bed, reading a magazine.

It was a trick, a joke; I was drunk; I was insane. She was *dead.* She could not be *there.* But oh, she most certainly was. Twenty years' dead Annette flipping the pages of a magazine. Without realizing it, I put my head on the glass, because the world was suddenly a new place for me.

"Annette?" I put a hand on the glass, too. It was cold. I felt that. She looked up and smiled. I was fifty-five years old and thought. . . . Forget what I thought. I was wrong.

She stood up and walked out of the room. I kept my forehead on the glass, and kept looking at the tangled bedspread where she'd sat. I had never in my life been so close to the answer, but I was petrified. Everything inside me howled and screeched and shook the bars of their cages. Let us out. Let us run away. The fire's close and will kill us.

"Professor Silver?"

I turned, and there was Annette. "I'm scared of you."

She nodded, said she understood.

"I don't know what to do. Can one talk to Death?"

"Yes, Professor. We *have* to talk."

"Is it because of Beenie?"

She nodded again, then gestured for me to follow. We walked a long way across the lawn and down to a boathouse beside the lake. There was a pinewood bench in front of it, and we sat down.

"She thought it was best if I came first, because you and I have the most to talk about. The other things aren't as serious."

"Sometimes I dream of talking to the dead. Sometimes the dreams are very vivid."

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She frowned. "This isn't a dream. I'm really here, and we have to talk, so please don't pinch yourself or jump up and down trying to wake up. It's real; I'm real. I am dead, but I'm here now."

"Why?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Because I hate you, and you must know that. It *was* your fault back then. Or a lot of it was. You were the straw that broke my back. You said my book was bad, and bingo, that did it."

"Oh Annette, I didn't —"

"*Yes, you did!* I wasn't *dumb*, you know. I knew what you were saying."

"Should I have lied? You said you wanted the truth."

"I did, but not one that would kill me. *Your* truth was like stabbing a knife into my fucking brain!

"I was so sure it was good. So sure you'd say, 'Annette, it's *stunning!* It's like nothing else.'" She slid closer down the bench, pointing furiously at me. "Do you remember what you *did* say? Huh? I do. You said, 'I think in certain places you've sat a little too close to the fires of your favorite writers. Sometimes you use their heat to keep your prose warm.'" You pompous, smug asshole! It was my fire! I lit all the fires in that book —"

"Annette, that's enough."

Beenie's firm voice came from behind me, but before I turned, I saw the girl's fury sink back into her face like a fist she had to hide. She still hated me, but was more afraid of what would happen if she didn't do what she'd been told.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Hiya, Scott. I wasn't expecting you so soon. Go in the house, Annette. You can talk more to him later."

Like the hyperbolic young woman she was, or had been, she got up without deigning to look at me, *tsk'd* loudly, and stomped off. I looked at her shoes, and realized they were the same high riding boots she'd worn and had been so in fashion when I had known her. "I feel like I'm going to have a heard attack, Beenie."

"Don't worry — your heart's as strong as a horse's. What you should watch out for is that uric acid. Stay away from tomatoes, is my advice."

I took a deep breath and looked at her. "Who are you?"

"God."

"Oh."

She smiled and took my hand. "Uh-Oh City!"

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* * *

Had it gotten colder, or had my soul's temperature dropped ten degrees since sitting on the bench? Beenie had a large stick in her hand and was snapping off little bits. That was the only sound around us except for the occasional faraway car driving into the Plum Hill turnoff.

"Don't you want to ask any questions?"

I was trying to get calm. My eyes were closed. She nudged me and handed over a piece of stick. I looked. A perfectly carved head of me about three inches high. Perfect coloring, too — my gray hair, blue eyes. I dropped it and unconsciously wiped my hands on my pants.

"Come on, boy; lighten up! It's funny. Ask me some questions, and let's get going on this."

It was my turn for narrowed eyes. "How can you be God and have cancer?"

"Good shot, Professor. Now we're cooking! I guess I should begin from the beginning, huh?" She was about to go on, when she saw something behind me and stopped. Standing up, she cupped both hands around her mouth and shouted, "You go back to the house, Annette! I'm not fooling, and I'm not telling you again!"

I didn't turn, because I had no desire whatsoever to see A. Taugwalder again anytime soon.

"That damned girl. I told her, you know? I told her she could have her say, but then she had to back off so I could explain things to you. But she's headstrong and so used to getting her way. Are you all right, Scott?"

"No."

"Too bad. Where was I? At the beginning. O.K. I was born in McPherson, Kansas. My father owned a hardware store, and our whole family worked there. One day, when I was behind the counter, a man I'd never seen before came in and asked for a pair of pliers. We got to talking, and he told me his name was Gilbert, Nolan Gilbert. I was fifteen years old. Do you know anything about the mystic Jewish?"

"You mean Jewish mystics?"

"Right, that's them."

"Well, something. I've read —"

"They came closest. Ever heard of the Lamed Wufniks?"

"Beenie, what are you *talking* about?"

"These mystics believed in Lamed Wufniks. Thirty-six righteous men

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whose job is to justify the world to God. Or, looking at it another way, they're supposed to explain to God why man has a right to be here. Now, if one of these thirty-six ever discovered who he was, he immediately died, and somebody else, in another part of the world, took his place. Because, you see, even though they don't know it, they're the secret pillars of the universe. Saviors. Without them doing this justifying, God would get rid of the whole bunch of mankind."

"Wup —"

"*Wuf.* Lamed *Wuf*niks. Which is not so far from wrong. The big difference is, we don't do any justifying, because we *are* God."

"*You're* a 'Wufnik'?"

"No, I'm God. Or one-thirty-sixth of Him. They got the number right."

A bird flew in over the water and out again. I looked at Beenie, the ground, Beenie, the ground. What was I supposed to say?

"You don't believe me. And what about Annette? You need more miracles? I can give them if it'll help, but I thought she'd be enough. You're a tough audience, Professor Silver. Here." With her left hand, she pulled a silver dollar from behind my neck. With her right, she held something up. In her palm was one of those plastic, dome-shaped doodads you shake up, and fake snow flutters and falls over a scene like Paris or the North Pole. Only, in this one, real life tiny people were sitting on a bench, moving —and after staring, I realized it was us in there, doing what we out here were doing, move for move.

"For God's sake, stop it!"

"O.K." She closed her hand around the snowy dome, and it disappeared.

I half-stood. "What do you want from me? Why are you doing this?"

She pulled me down again. "Just sit back and listen to the rest of my story. I was fifteen when I met Nolan Gilbert. He was about seventy. First he told me, then showed me, who he was, like I'm doing with you. Then he said he was dying, and I was supposed to replace him.

"That's how it works, see. You live your life normally, even after you know. But like everybody else — and you *are* like everybody else, Scott; you got to know that. Sooner or later, our time to die comes, too. A normal lifetime — sixty or seventy years, usually. But the difference is, *when* our time comes, we have to find a replacement. Some are luckier than others —they know who it is that they want years before they die. Like me with you."

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"You knew me before?"

"Sure. I've been cleaning your room at the university for years, but you never really saw me, because I worked night shift. Sometimes we'd pass each other in the hall if you worked late."

"You're telling me God is man?"

"No, no, no! I am *not* saying that at all. Man has God in him, but he's not God! No, the absolute simplest way to put it is this: man is man, but there are thirty-six chosen men who, *together*, are God. That's why normal people feel close to Him — because He's them in many ways. Nolan told me about the Greeks. You know about that. They believed there were lots of gods, which is kind of right, and that they all had human feelings. They were interested in sex, got angry, and did unfair things, stuff like that. So the Greeks were close, too, in guessing right, but they also thought gods lived up on special mountains away from the rest of the world. Wrong. We're here — just all over the place, and not looking like people'd expect, you know? I'm one, and I'm sure not impressive, huh? But I'm only a thirty-sixth of the big puzzle. Fit me together with the other parts, and you've got *ONE IMPRESSIVE GOD*, all right!

"I'll tell you something else, too — the world is full of puzzle pieces. Know how you feel lonely and apart sometimes? That's because you're not connected up the right way. People who find out that secret spend the rest of their lives trying to find their matching other parts. But I'm not here to talk about that with you. We don't have time for it. There's so much else I gotta tell you."

AS I mentioned earlier, before that wondrous afternoon with Beenie Rushforth, I was beginning to believe more and more in God, but one along the lines of Emily Dickinson's "God is a distant, stately lover." One who is fully aware of us and what we are up to every minute of our lives, but one who has the love and respect to allow us our own fates. When we die and reach whatever other side there is, He will go over our lives with us page by page, like an essay written for school, an essay having on it many mistakes that must be identified and corrected before the essay is put away. Once the mistakes have been brought to our attention, we will recognize most of them, and He will point out others. By the time we get up from His desk, we'll fully understand what we did wrong. Did I believe in reincarnation? No. Why would we repeat third

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grade if we fully perceived all of the mistakes we'd made there? I believed in an afterlife, but not on earth. I hadn't a clue as to where we went, and I did not want to guess.

However, when I arrived at my own front door again many hours later, my understanding of the world, of life, of death, of God . . . was a quintillion miles away from what I had thought before. For this loud, sweet, dying woman had proven without question that what she had told me was true. As she said, I was a hard case and wanted proof even beyond Annette. Proof that transcended the transcendent. I cannot tell you what she did, but I can say she took me where I wanted to go, and showed me the impossible.

I wanted to see Melville and Hawthorne alive and in the flesh, wanted to hear their voices and the kind of words they used outside their books. I wanted to see Albert Pinkham Ryder at Christmastime, brewing up his own private brand of perfume and giving it away in little jars to children. I wanted to visit Montaigne in his tower, circa 1591, and look over his shoulder while he wrote, "Though we may mount on stilts, we must still walk on our own legs, and on the highest throne in the world we are still sitting only on our own bottom." These were my heroes, the people I'd thought about my entire adult life. If Beenie was God, and time belongs to God, then she could clap once and give me these people for a moment. She did. She took me wherever I wanted to go, and affably said stay as long as you like. Funny thing was, I didn't need or want to stay long. Only a few minutes to breathe their air, see how they held their pen or formed words with their lips. That was all I needed, and she gave it to me.

After that, when I was sure, I asked questions, but her answers were often unsatisfying.

"Why me?"

"Scott, I'd tell you if I knew. But I don't, honest. It just happens. They tell you that — one day you'll see your replacement, and you'll *know*. I guess it's sort of like love at first sight."

"Beenie, you're *God!* God knows everything. There's nothing He doesn't know."

"Maybe when we're all joined together, all thirty-six of us. But that never happens, so individually we got to struggle along with what we *do* know. You're it, mister. You're the one who's gonna take my place."

"Where do we go when we die?"

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"Wherever you want. Some people stick around here; others take off."

"Take off *where*?"

"I told you: wherever they want."

"You're not helping!"

"They're vague questions. Remember in your class? 'Be more *specific*, Silver!' By the way, you know where you got that name? Your family's real name is 'Flink,' but when your great-grandfather came here from Saarland, he didn't think it sounded American, so he changed it to 'Silver.' Jack Silver instead of Udo Flink."

"Udo Flink? That's the stupidist name I ever heard."

"I guess your grandpa thought so, too. Do you want egg salad or corned beef?" From her left and right pockets, she took out sandwiches wrapped in plastic. "Roberta told me you liked my egg salad."

"I do. Thank you. That would be nice." She handed it to me, and I held it up. "An egg-salad sandwich from God."

"At least that way you can be sure it's fresh, eh?"

"Beenie, what am I supposed to do now? It's an incredible compliment that you've chosen me, but . . . what do you *do* when you're . . . ."

"Well, you're not there yet, bug, so don't start worrying about that. First you gotta pass the tests. I mean, you're already over the first hurdle, which is getting *picked*. But now come the tests. Those're the rules, and you've just gotta follow them."

"What kind of tests? What kind of rules?"

"You want to know now? Don't you want to finish your sandwich first?"

"Now."

"O.K." She wiped her mouth with a paper napkin that had 'Dairy Queen' printed across it. "First thing you gotta do — the first test, if you want to call it that — is work out your problem with Annette. A dead person can't be angry. There's a lot they've got to do on the other side, but so long as they're still mad at something in life, it keeps them sidetracked. Know what I mean?"

"Why can't *you* do something to take her anger away?"

"First of all, I wouldn't know how; remember, I'm only a fraction of the whole, and my powers aren't as great as you think. Second, you two've got to work it out yourselves. If I waved some kind of magic wand over her and did what you said, it wouldn't solve her problems. It'd only be like a stopgap. A kid's got to learn to tie its own shoes sooner or later."

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"What should I do to help her?"

"That's part of your test. You have to figure her out and how to start patching things up. I can tell you, though, she's not going to be much help. You've got yourself a hostile witness there, counselor. She hates your guts."

"So I gathered. Does she know about me? Obviously she knows about you, since you were the one who brought her back."

"Yeah, she knows about me, but not about you. She thinks I brought her here so you could make peace. She doesn't know it's part of your test."

"How do you hush the dead?"

She slapped my shoulder. "That's a good question. You know what one of my tests was?"

"Beenie, these are the ultimate mysteries! They're not recondite — they're *impossible* to understand. How am I supposed to go about —"

"What does 'recondite' mean?"

"'Difficult to understand.'"

"Stop whining, man. Of course they're hard to understand! You're the scholar, the thinker. I'm just a stupid little woman from Kansas with kids who don't like me. But I passed my tests. Sure, they were different from yours, but they weren't any easier."

"How can God have trouble with His children?"

"Hey, friend, did you ever read the Bible? A lot of *His* kids gave him lip. From what I heard, Moses sat up on the mountain and argued forty days! Christ? 'Why have You forsaken me?' Some gratitude, huh? And *Job*! He wanted personal proof! He wanted us to drop everything, come down and show him, like we were demonstrating a vacuum cleaner!"

"I thought you said all thirty-six of you never got together."

"Not anymore. In the old days, but not now. It hasn't been *necessary* until now. Don't you see, Scott? That's why man keeps wanting to be immortal. Not so he can live a million years, but because, deep in his blood, he knows God must be kept alive for every generation. God, who's a part of every man because He's made *up* of men. Thirty-six of them. From all cultures, all kinds of personalities and professions, men, women, kids. . . . The faces of God are always changing, because the separate pieces change. But at the end, there's just Him, and *He's* immortal so long as man wants to be. The fact that I have trouble with my daughter, or that I'm dying of cancer, doesn't matter. It's important to me, sure, but not to the

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big picture. Those're some of my tests — making peace with my children, and learning how to die. Christ had to learn how to die, too."

I made fists and shook them at the sky. "It's too earthly! It's supposed to be more majestic!"

Beenie said nothing while I raged, and after, when my futile hands opened and dropped slowly to my lap.

"Finish your lunch, Scott. I recondite it very highly."

The snow had started again as we approached her house. I would much rather have stayed outside and watched it fall than go in and talk to Annette.

"What am I supposed to say?"

"Play it by ear. See how she acts."

Beenie opened the front door and waved me in. It smelled nice inside. An aroma of woodsmoke and soap. Brushing the top of her head vigorously to get the snow off, she called, "Annette?"

No answer.

"Annette, come on out here, will you?"

When nothing happened, she scratched her nose and went looking. No Annette.

"Nowhere! That little skunk. Where'd she go?"

"Maybe she doesn't want to see me." I hoped my relief wasn't too obvious.

"I guess not. Well, that isn't your problem. I'll find her and get you two together. You want a hot toddy or something? Another sandwich?"

"No, thank you. I need to go and sit alone awhile. There's too much to think about."

"I'll say!" She opened the door and walked me out to the car. "Say, what's that inside there? Is it Annette?"

"I don't know."

There was something propped in the passenger's seat. At first, I, too, thought it was the girl, because it was so large. Getting closer, I could almost — "Nisco?! Great God in Heaven, it *is*! It's Nisco!"

"What?" Beenie came up next to me and bent over to look through the windshield. "What's Nisco? It's a stuffed animal. Look how big it is! Must have cost you a fortune. Did you buy it for one of your grandchildren? Hey, what's the matter?"

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"It's the *Nisco!* I can't believe it! I haven't thought of that —" I couldn't finish the sentence. My jaw worked up and down a couple of times, but didn't have the *oomph* to do anything else.

"Hey, what's up? What is that thing?"

I turned to Beenie and looked at her with, I'm sure, very stunned eyes. "It's the Nisco."

"You keep saying that. Looks like a stuffed animal to me."

"It is. When I was a boy, the only bad dreams I ever had were of that wolf. See the X's where the eyes should be? I once went to the movies and saw a cartoon with him in it. He was the bad guy. The tilted hat, big mouth, fangs. He was chasing the Three Little Pigs. That night and for months afterward, I dreamed he was chasing me. Holding a knife and fork and always drooling, he was going to carve me up. I was so scared. I used to wake up screaming. My parents'd run in, thinking someone was murdering me —"

"Why'd you call him Nisco?"

"I don't know. He was always that. Not Big Bad Wolf, just Nisco. The only thing that really frightened me when I was young.

"Annette put it there, didn't she? No one else in the world knew about him."

"Yes, she probably did. That's why she's not around. Left her calling card, but I don't know *what* she's trying to tell you. What're you going to do with it?"

I thought of that petrified little boy jerking awake in the middle of many nights, heart banging, panting — escaping, but only just. The sound of *him* behind me running, running so fast, rubbing his knife and fork together, ssslick-ssslick-ssslick, inches away, screaming, "I'm going to EAT you!" Laughing that terrifying, stupid cartoon laugh. No Devil from Hell can scare us more than childhood demons, cartoon wolves or not. Our soft spots are so much larger then. We have no armor.

"Huh? You want to keep it?"

"No! Can I throw it out here?"

"It's not necessary." She put her hand on the windshield over the passenger's side. The Nisco faded and slowly began to disappear. Then, at the last moment, when it was mostly shimmer and dark blur, there was a loud BLAP!, and the inside of the windshield splattered with blood.

* * *

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I didn't hear from either of them for three days. I tried to go about my life in as normal a fashion as possible, but that was absurd. God and Death and Sanity had all walked into my house and sat down at the table. They wanted to talk; they had plans for me. Was I supposed to pretend it wasn't them, and listen as if theirs were only another business proposition?

How would I handle Annette? What other tests would I have to face if I were able to resolve the conflict with her? What happened to you after you 'passed'? Did angels come down and take you on a tour of the heavens? *Were* there angels? I had to remember to ask Beenie: Do Angels exist?

Can you imagine having someone in your life who could answer that question conclusively?

I remained nervous and alert. I taught well, really singing out the questions and answers in my classes, keeping the students up on their toes. One girl stopped me in the hall and asked why I was in such a good mood. I laughed like a hyena. Good mood? Oh my dear, if only you knew.

Norah called one night to say she had broken up with the cartoonist and was going out with an airline pilot now. My daughter's fickleness and vague promiscuity had been a real thorn in my side for years, and we'd had more than one squabble about it and about her whole life-style. But this time, we talked seriously and illuminatingly about why she'd decided to make the change. At the end of the conversation, there was a comfortable silence, then she said, "Thank you, Dad."

"For what?"

"Taking me seriously."

"Darling, I've taken you seriously since you were a girl."

"No, you've often treated me like I was a student you thought was going to be great, but ended up disappointing you."

"Norah!"

"It's true, Dad, but listen to me. *Hear* what I'm saying. This conversation was special; it was really different. It's the first time in I-can't-remember-when that I felt you were listening and were actually interested. You don't have to approve of me, Dad. I'm not asking for that anymore. I want only for you to love me and hear about my life."

When we'd hung up, I went to find Roberta, who had been listening in on another extension. "Was what she said true? Have I been such a lousy father all these years?"

"Not lousy, Scott, but tough and often removed. You were very hard on

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the girls for years. We've talked about this before. Gerald was born when Norah was twelve, remember. I'm sure that's what she was referring to."

Our three children — Norah, Freya, and Gerald. Norah illustrates medical textbooks and lives in Los Angeles. Freya is married with two children and lives in Chicago. Gerald is severely retarded and is institutionalized. We tried for years to keep him home with us, but if you know about care for the severely retarded, you know it is virtually impossible to live any kind of normal life around someone with this handicap. They are black holes of need for help and love. No matter what you give them, it is never enough or correct. You can ask for nothing in return, because they have nothing. Sure, you pray for them to show some sign of recognition or normal behavior. Just once. Just a flash of what in your greatest hopes might happen some magical day: they smile when you kiss them rather than scream as if they've been wounded. Or pick up a spoon and dip it in the soup instead of hitting themselves in the face with it or gouging at their eyes. Unknowingly, they take everything you have. When you are exhausted and resentful, guilt taps you on the shoulder and knocks you down another way. It is a terrible lesson and burden. I would not wish it on my worst enemy.

When Gerald was seven, Freya walked out of the kitchen one morning to answer the telephone, and her brother put his hand down on a lit kitchen burner. At the hospital, even Roberta, who had fought hardest to keep him home, agreed we could no longer care for him properly. After he recovered, we found a perfect school, and he has lived there since. He is both our sword of Damocles and our permanent reminder of how wonderful life can be if you are lucky.

"We all adjusted to him differently, Scott. I tried too hard to see him normal and gave him too much of the love I should have given the girls. You did what you could, but it *was* a terrible disappointment, and it ate you up. When it got too much, you retreated from all of us into your work. It makes sense. It's both of our personalities perfectly. I wanted everyone to be happy; you wanted everyone to be exceptional. Neither of us had a chance of succeeding, so we both made big mistakes. But you know, we couldn't have been so bad, because the girls still love us. It's clear in whatever they do."

Yes, we'd had this discussion before, but having it again right after Norah's comment hit me a K.O. punch to the heart. Had I really been so

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bad and negligent? Worse, had I known that all along, but spent years hiding it from myself? I knew life was a progressively more sophisticated game of hide-and-seek with ourselves, but could we really be unaware of something this momentous?

Further, if it were true, why would *I* rate to replace Beenie Rushforth as one of the thirty-six? A man who treated his family with such arrogance and disrespect? In her inimitable way, she'd told me that "it took all kinds," but could such an appalling egoist be one of them?

So much at once. My life jumped, bounced, and floated like one of those astronauts walking in space. It had suddenly become almost weightless, because its own personal gravity had ceased to be. I tried repeatedly to call Beenie, but there was never an answer. Finally I realized she wanted me to think things over, and would answer my questions only when she came again to clean our house. How ridiculous yet correct that profession was for her. The ultimate cleaner. The ultimate bringer of order.

Needless to say, I galloped back and forth over the emotional gamut, waiting for her next visit. I canceled my class for that day, and bribed Roberta out of the house with a gift of lunch and an afternoon movie with her best friend. Ten minutes after she left, the empty and quiet house made me so nervous that I got out the vacuum cleaner and did the floor in the kitchen before the bell rang.

I opened the door, and there was Annette Taugwalder.

"Beenie couldn't come, so she sent me. I'm supposed to clean your house." She brushed by me into the hall, throwing this last line over her shoulder. "Wow, I never thought I would be in *this* house. Vacuum cleaner's all ready for me, eh? O.K."

I closed the door and looked at her. "Why didn't she come?"

"Because she told me to. I'm a good *Putzfrau*. Don't you remember the chapter in my book where the girl cleans houses in the summer for extra money? Don't worry, Professor; your place will look nice when I'm done." With that, she took off her coat, threw it on a chair, turned on the vacuum cleaner, and went right to work. I stood there feeling like a fool. She didn't look at me again.

What was going on? There was nothing to do but retreat to my study and try again to call Beenie at home. The phone there rang and rang. She had to have done this for some reason, but *what*? She must have known I'd

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have a million questions. Why wasn't she here to answer them? How could she drop this girl in my lap and walk away? Where the hell was she?

Luckily, there was a small television in my room. I switched it on to fill up some mental airspace. What was Annette doing out there? The idea of a dead woman cleaning the house was monstrous and monstrously funny. I couldn't help smiling. A peculiar thought crossed my mind: she was the second dead person to be in this house. Our poor son, for all intents and purposes dead, had spent years here.

The person on television was talking about Gorgonzola cheese. I had once lived in the same universe as Gorgonzola cheese. Now I lived in one where dead students vacuumed my house and God wouldn't answer Her phone.

I sat at my desk and pretended to work by pushing pencils and papers around, looking for nothing in an address book, reading a bank statement twice because even the numbers had no meaning.

I tiptoed to my door and put an ear to it. Only the 'hoooosh" of the machine. Was she really here only to clean? Both the expression on her face and the tone of her voice had been so haughty and dismissive. She knew she held all the best cards, and I could do nothing till she made a first play. All because of a badly written, sophomoric, heavy-breathing, and pale copy of — There was a knock at the door. I forced myself not to run and open it. Count to five, rise slowly, turn the doorknob slowly. "Yes?"

"Sorry to interrupt, but I didn't know if you wanted this or not?" It was the same relic finding that Beenie had done each time she cleaned. Had she instructed Annette to do this, too? The girl held out a beat-up green spiral notebook with the word "Chargers" printed in thick black letters across the top. That was the nickname of the local high school. I assumed the book belonged to one of our girls.

"I'll take it. Thank you."

"You're welcome." She handed it to me and started to leave.

"Annette? Why *did* you come today?"

Her face was only innocence. "To clean your house. Beenie asked me to take her place. I told you."

"Cleaning's not important. Wouldn't you rather talk about your —"

"No. She just told me to bring you things to see if you want them." She left.

I didn't know what to do. Follow her, grab her arm, sit her down and

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say, "Listen, dead person, you and I have to have it out. We have to talk about your bad novel." No, that wouldn't do.

I went back to my desk with the school notebook and, for want of anything better to do, opened it.

"Hey, Turd Bird!"

I whipped my head aside to see who had said it, but a hand went over my mouth. Scared, I looked at whose hand. I didn't know the boy. I realized only then that we were face-to-face, very close. And I felt him. I felt him inside me down there.

"Quiet, ssh; he'll go away!"

I looked at this boy. Who was he? There were three small pimples on his chin. What was he talking about? What was I doing here? We were inside a toilet stall. I was sitting on his lap. He was on the toilet seat. His pants lay below his knees.

"Hey man, come on, hurry up with her, willya?"

My lover started grinning at what his pal outside the stall had said. He pumped and pumped away inside me, that awkward position, trying to finish, trying to bring himself off, get it over with so he could go back to the class we were both missing.

I was my daughter Freya. Quiet, dull Freya, who covered her bedroom walls with pictures of kittens and read seven-hundred-page books with titles like *Love's Flame and Fury*. She received average grades in school and let her sister do most of the talking and arguing. She liked to take care of Gerald. She baked him cakes and fed them to him in slow forkfuls.

She was having sex on a high school toilet with a boy who was hurrying to finish so he could sneak back to class with his friend who waited on the other side of the stall door.

I *was* her. I could feel the boy, smell his heat and ugly cologne. The zipper on his pants cut into me.

"O.K., O.K., O.K.!" Coming, he flung his head back too hard and banged it against the wall. "Damn! Oh, yeah, nice. Damn that hurt! Thanks, Freebie; that was good." Rubbing his head with one hand, he pushed me off gently with the other. I hovered above him on bended, quivering knees. I wanted him to say something else. Hadn't I come out here with him in the middle of my favorite class? Something nice I could hold to me when he was gone. But he was too busy pulling himself together.

"Come on, Dipwad! Five minutes left to class!"

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"Right!" He zipped up quickly and reached behind me to open the door. "Seeya, Freebie. Thanks for the Freebie!"

His friend outside tipped his head around the door, checked me out, and said in a loud, long falsetto, "FREEEEEEEEBIE!" The two of them snickered and were gone. I knew I should return to class, too, but, with five minutes left, what was the point? I'd use paper towels to clean off my legs, check my makeup in the mirror, and be looking O.K. again before the bell rang and anyone might see me walking out of the men's room.

I DID THAT once when I was in high school. But the guy didn't come. We were both too scared."

Because my eyes were closed, I only heard Annette's voice and felt when she pulled the notebook out of my hands.

"Hey, don't worry, be happy! That's all you get. You can open your eyes — you're back home."

She was squatting down in front of me, close by. Unsmiling, but I could tell she was pleased.

"Was that really Freya? Did she do that?"

"Frequently. Touch this notebook again, and you'll see *many* things she did. She had two nicknames in high school. 'Freebie,' as in, it's free for anyone who wants it. And 'Tunnel.' 'The Silver Tunnel.' I have something else for you that I found."

"I don't want it! Go away!"

"Oh no, you *have* to have it, Perfesser. Them's the rules. You told me the truth; now I tell you. Why do you think she brought me back? I'm your Medusa! I tell you nothin' but the truth, and the *whole* truth about your life. Remember how Beenie started finding things here? I found more."

"Beenie's not evil!"

"This isn't evil; this is the facts. I'm showing you your truth. What others thought of you, what really happened when you weren't looking.... You like telling it to other people. Here's some for you. Remember what Norah said: 'You don't have to approve of me, Dad.'"

"You don't know Norah!"

"No, but I know the truth. Here's treasure number two, *Dad*. Remember this? He loved these."

She held something out, but I was so confused that I didn't realize what it was at first.

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"It's a bagel! Don't you remember how Gerald loved them? Used to walk around the house with one in his mouth? In the *good* old days, that is. Before you so thoughtfully shipped him away to the loony bin."

When I didn't take it, she tossed it into my lap. I didn't want it. It felt heavy. A piece of bread.

The moment it touched me, I saw the world through his eyes. Through the eyes of Gerald/child/man/madman/animal. Colors roared and whispered. They had voices. Loud — everything was screamingly louder. Chairs weren't chairs anymore, because I didn't understand what they were. Smells — the smallest nothing smell was an explosion a hundred times what I knew, good and bad. Chemicals, flowers, the bugs in the ground, breakfast dishes stewing in the sink. Things. I smelled them all.

My mouth. There was something in my mouth, and I liked it. I hummed around it. It was nice against my teeth. Soft.

I walked around wherever I could go. There were people sometimes. They smelled good, too. Sometimes they touched me or said things at me or pushed me to be in a place or not in a place. If I didn't like the place, I'd yell. O.K., O.K., O.K., they'd say. O.K.

Everything was O.K. and tasted good, and I smelled the world and heard the people making noise. And then there was a BANG, and *he* came in, and I fell on the floor and yelled because here he was. He hurts me. He yells at me. He takes my arm and pulls it and yells at me. I hate him. I hate him. I hit him. I will hit and hit. That big thing will hurt. Pick it up and hit him, and he'll fall down. He is bad. Sometimes he's soft and puts me under his arm, but he's bad. The others say things to him, but they are scared, too. He yells at them, too. He goes into the room and BAMS! the door. When he's gone, people talk again and are nice. He is bad. I hate. Bad. Hate. Bad. BAM.

"Stop it!"

I don't understand.

"Stop it, Annette! Take it away from him this minute."

They yell. I don't understand. The white one comes to me and takes away my mouth thing.

I came to again in my study and understood. For the last minutes, I knew the world through my son's hideously shattered perception. The world through broken glass, fragments of beauty and terror and mystery that exceed all bounds. Disturbing beyond any bounds, truly Hell on

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earth, was one simple realization: my retarded son hated me. Of all the bizarre bits, scraps, slivers, pieces of our world he could grasp, the only thing he consciously knew was that he hated me. His only truth, the only genuine clearness he knew. I was bad. He wanted me dead.

"Get out of here. Go back to my place and wait for me."

"You told me to clean their house!"

"Annette, go *back*!"

I sat on the floor blinking, a survivor of my own life. I watched the two of them bellow at each other. The gray woman and the young one who might have been her daughter.

"Why don't you let me finish? Let me have him! He deserves it!"

"Get out, Annette. I am *not* going to tell you again!"

My son. His mind of stone, or air, clouds you would fall right through to the ground, but he knew how to despise me. Wanted me dead. Was I that bad? Had I been that evil?

"To him, you were, but he doesn't understand things too good, Scott. Come on; let me help you up."

I had no energy. It was fine to be sitting on the floor. I must have fallen there. I wouldn't let her pull me. Annette left the room, screaming, "ASSHOLES!" And I *was* an asshole. I was a miserable beast.

"He hates me. He's capable of doing that. It's astonishing. We thought he had no clear idea of anything. But he's clear enough to hate me."

"I know the feeling, kid. When I told my daughter I had cancer, first thing she said, the very first, was had I made a will or not." Beenie left the room and returned with two glasses of grapefruit juice. Handing one to me, she said drink first and we'll talk in a minute. I was so empty and burned out of feeling that I'd have bitten the glass if she'd told me. I sipped, and the bitter, fresh taste of cold juice slid down my throat.

"Hey, don't you remember?" She raised her eyebrows.

"Remember what? Beenie, have I really been so bad? Such a total failure?"

"I'm not talking about that. Don't you remember your glass?" I looked at it and saw a glass. So what? "So what?"

"Don't you remember these glasses?"

I looked again. "No."

"Christmas 1975. Norah wanted to be special and have cocktails before dinner, so you told her to fill up these glasses with fruit juice for all of you."

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"And we threw them in the fireplace after we were finished. I did it first. Even Gerald. He watched what we did, and threw his, too. They were expensive glasses. Roberta was furious, but ended up throwing hers, too. That was lovely. We felt Russian."

"There's been a lot of nice in your life. No, you're not such a bad man. You've been bad, but you're not bad. Annette just picked moments. It's easy to do that when you're talking about fifty years of moments. She's very bad. Very angry and messed up."

"What do I do now, Beenie? How do I win with her?"

"You can't. That's the problem. I thought—"

The study door crashed open, and Annette stood there, a hand out in front of her, pointing. "I don't care what you say. I've waited *years* for this." She started across the room for me. I didn't even have a chance to wonder what would happen, much less get up and run away, because behind her were *things*. Not ogres and monsters, grave things, but *my* things. Things I would know only because she had brought my life with her. Only, they came as vapors, colors, smells, sounds, lights, darks, forms, hints. . . . My life stood seething behind her, ready to pounce, ready to kill me with its fatal truth. Life through Gerald's eyes, my daughter in a toilet stall, things I already knew and hated or ignored. Things I didn't know, but people knew about me. Lies others had believed. Truths people said, but no one believed. Things I'd longed for, but knew would never happen. Lies I'd told myself, truths that cut deep, realizations sharp and bitter or fresh as air across ice. All of them, all of their energy and force. We think these things go away with time, like mist on an early-morning field; the sun comes up, and it burns the mist away.

But it doesn't. Because I caught a glimpse of it, alive and full of power, I tell you it does *not* go away. Like any sound ever made, the truth of our lives remains. It is still there somewhere, forever, no matter what our memory tries to do to it.

If I'd been exposed to it longer, I'd've died. As it was, I saw enough in seconds to scald my soul the rest of my life. If I'm not mistaken, in there amongst the other facts and certainties was how long the rest of my life would *be*.

"Annette!" Beenie whipped an arm down as though she were pitching a baseball. The girl and what was behind her disappeared at once. Beenie made fists, held them up, and shook them at the ceiling. "Again, again,

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again. Why again? What is going *on*?"

It was not my place to ask questions at that point, so I kept quiet. Quiet and shaken. Beenie shook her fists a long time, then slowly let them fall. "I'm sorry, Scott."

"Sorry? You saved me!"

"No, I used you." She came over and sat down next to me on the floor. Before she spoke, she balled her hands again and asked, "Why is this *happening*?

"Scott, remember when I told you about the thirty-six people who make up God? At least that part is true. And the other part is, I really am one of them, dumb as I am. The lying begins with you and Annette. Remember when I said I've been watching you for years? Well, that's true, too, but not for the reasons I said.

"Years ago, when she was a senior in college, I saw Annette and knew *she* was the one to replace me in the thirty-six. I'm sorry I said it was you; I lied." She reached over and took my hand, gave it a squeeze, and let go. "It was never you — it was Annette. I knew it the minute I saw her, and have been following her ever since. Just like when Nolan saw me.

"So I told her, and, amazingly enough, she seemed to understand. In the

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beginning, everything was fine, and the first tests she had, she went right through with no problem. Then she went to graduate school and took your class. She wrote that novel, asked you to read it, and you know the rest."

"She killed herself." It took an instant to crystallize in my mind. "*Killed* herself? One of the thirty-six *killed* themselves? How is that possible? God doesn't —"

"No, He doesn't, and that's our problem. We don't understand, either. What's worse, it's happening more than you would think. Once in a while in the past, there'd be a mistake, and something like this would happen —but it was so rare, we paid no attention. But now something's gone very wrong, and it's happening more than ever. We have to find out why. So me and a couple of others were told to get these people and bring them back. Try to find out either why they did it, or at least make peace with what caused them to do it. Maybe that way we'll begin to figure out. . . ." She grimaced, sighed. "Because, you see, they can't be replaced if they do this to themselves—"

"People *chosen* to be God, people who know that and *understand* what

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that means still kill themselves?!"

"Yup."

"'Yup'? That's all — 'Yup'? What does it mean? What does it say about the future? There's got to be someone to replace Annette."

"No one. She didn't choose anyone. She hadn't even finished taking the tests. That's why I'm here. That's why I brought her back to see you. We don't know."

"What do you mean? You know everything, damn it! You're IT! And if God is diminished, if there are fewer of you, then good is diminished, too!"

"That's right. That's why more and more is falling apart. That's why it's so bad here."

"And Beenie, what am *I* supposed to do now? I'm not one of your chosen, O.K. I don't deserve to be, but what do I do with all this knowledge? What am I supposed to do now that I know it? Please take it away. Just do that — move a hand like you did and clear it out of my head. Just do that one thing for me."

"You don't want that, Scott. You're the only one who owns your experiences. Now that you know the truth about them, use it to try and make yourself better. That's the best thing to do with it. Sure, I can wave it away, abracadabra, but you have the potential to be a much better person now that you know who you really are."

"Fate's not determined? But I saw when I was going to die!"

"That's only time on the clock. I'm talking human time. How long does it take to write a book? For some, it's fast; for others, slow. However long it takes to get down those sentences of the heart, eh? I can't show you the book you'll write, Scott. I can only help you do research and verify your sources."

Despite everything, a smile popped onto my face. "*Verify*?"

"Yeah, I've been studying my vocabulary to keep up with you."

"You . . . and your people haven't decided the future already?"

She shook her head no. God shook no. It was as simple as that.

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INDEX TO VOLUME 82, JANUARY-JUNE 1992

Aandahl, Vance: *Water* ..... Apr. 95
Aldridge, Ray: *The Love Farmer (novella)* ..... Mar. 113
Asimov, Isaac: Science: *Star Bright* ..... Jan. 116
Of Human Folly ..... Feb. 105
Bauman, Jill: cover for *"The Swan"* ..... February
Benford, Gregory: A Scientist's Notebook ..... Apr. 85
May 108
Bisson, Terry: Next ..... May 58
Bowes, Rick: *On Death And The Deuce* ..... May 119
Brunner, John: *The Man Who Lost The Game Of Life* ..... Jan. 30
Bryant, Edward: *Country Mouse* ..... Mar. 86
Budrys, Algis: Books ..... Jan.-June
Grabow And Collicker And I ... May 132
Cadigan, Pat: *True Faces (novelet)* ..... Apr. 26
Canty, Tom: cover for *"The Twelve Swans"* ..... June
Card, Orson Scott: Books To Look For ..... Jan.-June
Carroll, Jonathan: *Uh-Oh City (novella)* ..... June 111
Chilson, Rob: *Far Off Things (novelet)* ..... May 7
Competition: #55 Report ..... Apr. 159
Conner, Mike: *The Mystery Spot (novelet)* ..... Jan. 126
Cornell, Richard: *Magritte's Kick* ..... June 62
Counsil, Wendy: *How To Tame The Vampire* ..... Feb. 124
Davis, Grania: *Tree Of Life, Book Of Death (novelet)* ..... Mar. 9
de Lint, Charles: *The Graceless Child (novelet)* ..... Feb. 10
Di Filippo, Paul: *Fractal Paisleys (novelet)* ..... May 72
Ellison, Harlan: Harlan Ellison's Watching ..... Jan. 73
Farmer, Nancy: *Origami Mountain* Mar. 101
Farris, Joseph: Cartoons ..... Jan.-Apr., June
Foster, Alan Dean: *Having Words* ..... Apr. 98
Friesner, Esther M.: *Such A Deal* ..... Jan 55
Gervais, Stephen: Cover for *"Going Through Changes"* ..... April
Gilman, Carolyn Ives: Lost Road ..... Feb. 129
Goulart, Ron: *Hershey's Kisses* ... Jan. 82
Haldeman, Jack C. II: *Lonesome Homesick Blues* ..... Feb. 61
Hardy, David: Cover for *Bhen-Ski* ..... January
Cover for *"Far Off Things"* ..... May
Harris, S.: Cartoons ..... Jan.-May
Hauser, Frank: Cartoons ..... Jan., Mar.
Heath, Mark: Cartoon ..... Apr.
Jonik, John: Cartoon ..... Apr.
Kale, Bonita: *Miracle In A Small Village* ..... June 42
Koja, Kathe: *The Company Of Storms* ..... June 7
Koman, Victor: *Bootstrap Enterprise* ..... Feb 42
Laidlaw, Marc: Cartoons ..... Feb., June
Lawson, James: *Heartwired (novelet)* ..... Feb. 81
McAuley, Paul J.: *Prison Dreams (novelet)* ..... Apr. 60
Maio, Kathi: Films ..... May, Mar.
Martin, Henry: Cartoons ..... Jan.-Mar. May, June
Murphy, Pat: *Going Through Changes* ..... Apr. 47
Onopa, Robert: *The Swan* ..... Feb. 65
Reed, Kit: *Tapeworm* ..... Mar. 60
Reed, Robert: After All (novelet) ..... Jan. 10
Birth Day ..... June 50
Sterling, Bruce: *Science: Outer Cyberspace* ..... June 102
Struthers, Andrew: Cartoons ..... Mar., May
Thompson, Jessie: *Angelman* ..... Apr. 109
Tiedemann, Mark W.: *Shattered Template* ..... June 27
Tilton, Lois: *The Twelve Swans* ..... June 87
Utley, Steven: *Look Away* ..... Feb. 115
Vukcevich, Ray: *Mom's Little Friends* ..... Apr. 8
Walotsky, Ron: Cover for *"Tree Of Life"* ..... March
Wheeler, Deborah: *Madrelita (novelet)* ..... Feb. 140
Wightman, Wayne: *The Cretaceous Waltz* ..... Jan. 101
Wilber, Rick: *Calculating Love* ... Mar. 71
Wilson, F. Paul: *Bugs* ..... May 138
Winter, Laurel: *Infinity Syrup* .... June 79
Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn: *Investigating Jericho (novella)* ..... Apr. 113

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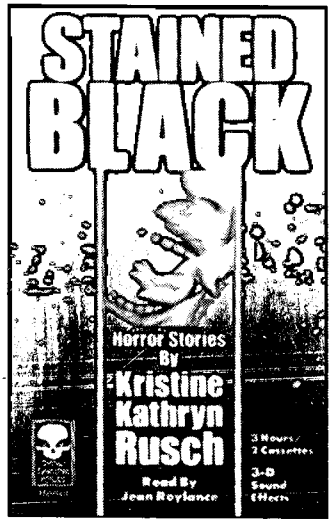

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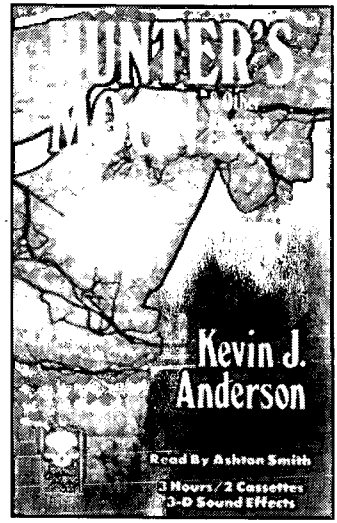

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